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Millenial Iran: Political Disenchantment, Post-Network Society and Commodity Culture

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Millenial Iran: Political Disenchantment, Post-Network Society and Commodity Culture

by

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Dedication

For my father

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Millenial Iran: Political Disenchantment, Post-Network Society and Commodity Culture

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This dissertation contributes to the field of modern Iranian sociocultural history. It engages in the historical analysis of the intersection of Iranian youth culture and media studies, presenting the implications of a Post-Network society in the context of contemporary Iran. Existing scholarship on youth culture as it manifests in Post-Reform Iran is heavily dominated by works that privilege resistance in their investigation. I, however, argue for a class-based reading of the subject, in which socioeconomic aspirations prevail over the intention of resistance in the characterization of Iran's Millenial Generation.

While the Reform Movement and Mohammad Khatami's election served to render the post-Revolution generation as a legitimate political force, the Reformist President's impotence to champion the demands of his youthful constituents throughout his presidential tenure triggered a pervasive sense of disillusionment among the Third Generation. The subsequent political inaction that it inspired arguably abetted the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and initiated the Post-Reform Era, which coincided with the Post-Network Era in media worldwide. During this time, the penetration of convenience technologies significantly impacted the formation of Iranian youth culture. As Iranian Millenials became increasingly dependent on mobile Internet technology, they

created a new media environment that helped precipitate the emergence of a commodity culture. This commodity culture, along with the arrival and adaptation of Post-Network technologies, has led to the prevalence of certain trends among young urban Iranians. These trends serve as markers of socioeconomic class in today's Iran, and are used by Iranian Millenials as a type of social currency to signify and validate their identification with their preferred class group. Ultimately, the adaptation of Post-Network media practices, the pronounced political disenchantment of the Ahmadinejad era, and the neoliberal economic policies touted by the Islamic Republic since the early 1990s, have all combined to create a society in which class identity has become a definitive feature of Millenial Iran.

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Introduction

Sometime in the fall of 2014, I was scrolling through my Instagram feed and came across a post that caught my eye. It was a stencil print on wood of a man's figure holding up a sign that read, "PROTEST IS BEAUTIFUL." Underneath the stencil print was another sign that read, "BEH TOKHMAM," which is a vulgar colloquial expression in Persian that literally translates as "to my balls" and is used to indicate, "I don't give a fuck." This post had popped up on my feed because a number of the Iranians whom I followed had liked it. The image had resonated with them because it conveyed the general sense of apathetic aversion that contemporary young Iranians feel toward the idea of revolution. It was emblematic of the post-Revolution era Iranian, the product of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

As a second-generation Iranian-American, I have always felt somewhat removed from what it means to be an Iranian of the post-Revolution era. Like many second-generation Iranian-Americans, my vision of the *vatan*[1] was painted by stories and recollections of Pahlavi Iran, the golden age of the Diaspora's collective nostalgia. I also grew up romanticizing my parents' generation's involvement in the 1979 Revolution. So, in 2009, when claims of a fraudulent presidential election inspired the Green Movement (a social movement primarily driven by the country's youth), I imagined an opportunity to participate in a similar sort of revolutionary zeal (to the extent that could be expected abroad) that my parents had experienced thirty years prior. I became involved in the organizing efforts of the Iranian graduate students in my hometown during that summer, penetrating and achieving acceptance within this foreign (to me) community. After the suppression of the movement, I maintained my involvement with this

[1] Homeland.

community, as they had become a significant part of my social network. In doing so, I had the opportunity to observe a demographic of post-Revolution era Iranians.

Through casual observation, from 2009 to 2013, I detected a growing sense of political disillusionment within this community, as exemplified by the aforementioned Instagram post. This discernment actually inspired the original research question for the present project: Why does Iran's post-revolution generation have such a myopic and blasé attitude toward the idea of resistance and revolution? Why does this demographic distinctly lack the revolutionary fervor and political passion that characterized their parental generation? What are the defining characteristics of this demographic and what implications do they have for the future of Iran? Before embarking on my research for this project, my initial assumption was that this demographic is apathetic, complacent, superficial, materialistic and self-absorbed. This generation, I thought, harbored a distinctly different characterization from their parental generation, which had embraced the revolutionary spirit of the 1970s, fomented a movement to topple their tyrannical dictator, and served as an inspiration and model for the oppressed and downtrodden people of the world. As I pursued my research, the project evolved to become a study of the Iranian Millenial Generation (the post-Revolution generation) as it emerged during the Ahmadinejad era, through an examination of popular humor in media.

In this work, I posit that Iranian Millenials emerged as a sociopolitical force during Mohammad Khatami's presidency and the Reform Era, but that soon after experienced a pervasive sense of disillusionment and political impotence with the subsequent election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, his suppression of the Green Movement and the societal ailments that became prominent during his administration. Ahmadinejad's presidency not only marked the beginning of the Post-Reform era in Iran, it also coincided with the inception of the Post-

Network period in media worldwide, which was characterized by the emergence of new distribution methods, convenience technologies and a participatory culture. The Third Generation's embrace of Post-Network practices within the context of Post-Reform Iran reified a commodity culture that has facilitated the materialization of a particular set of trends and behaviors dictated from the upper echelons of Iranian society. These trends function as class makers, which I contend, Millenial Iranians use as their primary form of self-identification. Ultimately, I argue that contemporary Iranian youth culture is a product of the Islamic Republic's sustained neoliberal economic policy, the political disenchantment of the Millenial generation and the prevalence of Post-Network media practices that emerged in Post-Reform Iran, all of which have combined to result in a society that is increasingly defined by class identity.

Understanding Iranian Youth Culture Through Humor and Media

Humor, as an item of cultural consumption, has the ability to cut across socio-economic lines and create a sense of camaraderie among people. As Mikhail Bakhtin astutely observed, the study of humor reveals an alternative worldview, a perspective that may otherwise not be accessible through any other form but laughter.[2] In his theory of Carnivalesque, Bakhtin states that carnival laughter is characterized by a profound egalitarianism, in which official hierarchies are inverted. Mary Douglas asserts that jokes are an attack on control with a subversive effect on the dominant structure of ideas. She contends that joking provides relief from social classifications and hierarchies—a temporary suspension of the social structure that echoes

[2] Mikhael Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

Bakhtin's theory of Carnivalesque.[3] Humor in this context, then, reflects the social consciousness of a people and their uncensored derision of authority.[4]

This dissertation uses the lens of popular humor to examine Iranian youth culture as it developed during the Ahmadinejad administration (2005-2013). Ahmadinejad's presidency coincided with what media studies scholars have delineated as the dawn of the Post-Network Era. This period is characterized by an expansion of convenience technologies that have been facilitated by the advent of the Internet and its revolutionizing effects on telecommunications.[5] For this project, I focused on media texts that resonated deeply with young Iranians, and which were circulated and spread through Post-Network conventions. I did this, not only to illustrate the issues of concern and prevailing trends within Iranian youth culture, but also to demonstrate how the Millenial Generation created this culture through Post-Network practices.

As Asef Bayat observes, *youthfulness* indicates "a particular habitus or behavioral and cognitive dispositions that are associated with the fact of being 'young'." Bayat defines youth as "a distinct social location between childhood and adulthood, where the youngster in a relative autonomy is neither totally dependent (on adults) nor independent, and is free from being responsible for others."[6] While Shahram Khosravi asserts that youth should be viewed as an economic and social concept rather than a chronological age, Pierre Bourdieu suggested that perceiving youth as a social unit implicates the manipulation of young people.[7] Bayat, however, reiterates that youth, as a social category of collective agents, is a specifically modern and urban

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[3] Mary Douglas, "Jokes," in *Implicit Meanings: Selected Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 146-164.
[4] Ravinder Kaur, "The Politics of Humor in Iran," *ISIM Review* 22 (2008): 46-47.
[5] Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).
[6] Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 116.
[7] Shahram Khosravi, *Precarious Lives: Waiting and Hope in Iran* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 16; Pierre Bourdieu, "Youth Is Just a Word," in *Sociology in Question*, translated by Richard Nice (London: Sage, 1993).

phenomenon.[8] Youth, therefore, does not refer to an age cohort but rather the phase in a person's life between childhood and adulthood. The unique social and economic circumstances of a society determine the form and duration of youth in each local and at each historical epoch.

The Millenial Generation

Anthropology understands generation as a category of social identity (e.g. class, ethnicity and gender). Sara Lamb uses the term "generation" to refer to a group of people who were born within the same time period and have thus been impacted by similar historical events and cultural forces.[9] Christopher Bollas uses the phrase "generational objects" to refer to the collectively lived experiences that represent a generation's identity.[10] Lived experiences of historical events and crises contribute to the formation of generational consciousness, which shapes everything from social and political behaviors, to sexuality, to language and communication to symbols and rituals. While generational cycles are understood to typically span a period of approximately thirty years, they shorten in societies where historical events occur with greater frequency. Mehran Sohrabzadeh observes that in Iran, due to such historical events such as the 1979 Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War, the Reform Era, and the Green Movement, the generational cycle has decreased from thirty years to ten years.[11] Currently, Iranians born after the establishment of the Islamic Republic are categorized according to the decade within the Iranian calendar that they were born.[12]

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[8] Bayat, *Life as Politics*, 119.
[9] Sara Lamb, "Generation in Anthropology," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Behaviors and Sciences*, Vol. 9 (Oxford: Elsevier, 2001).
[10] Christopher Bollas, *Being a Character: Psychoanalysis and Self Experience* (London: Routledge, 1993).
[11] Mehran Sohrabzadeh, "Moghāyes-ye zehnīyat-e nasli va beyn-e nasli dar naslhā-ye dāneshgāhi pas az enghelāb-e eslami," *Faslnāmeh-ye Tahghīghāt Farhangī*, Vol. 2, 8 (2009): 294-363.
[12] The modern Iranian calendar (referred to as the Jalāli Calendar in Persian) is a solar, observation-based calendar. It begins each year on the vernal equinox as precisely determined by astronomical observations in Tehran, and

In the context of today's Iran, the First Generation refers to those who came of age under the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. They reaped the benefits of the 1970s oil boom, allowing them to witness an expansive economy and the westernization of Iranian urban life. This generation experienced an Iran that strove to be in rank with the most modern countries in the world. However, many in this generation were also responsible for the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The Second Generation came of age during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1989) and thereby has childhood memories of pre-revolution Iran. This generation grew up experiencing the most austere years of the Islamic Republic.[13] The Third Generation refers to the demographic of Iranians who were born right before or after the 1979 Revolution and have no recollection of Pahlavi Iran. This demographic came of age at the turn of the twenty-first century and are essentially the product of the Islamic Republic.

The Third Generation, or *nasl-e sevom*, is a term that became popularized among Iranians of this demographic just before the turn of the century.[14] They used it as a means to describe themselves as the post-Revolution generation. Since then, as Orkideh Behrouzan observes, generational labels have become both abundant and contested in today's Iran; they include: *daheh-ye shasti-hā* ("of the sixties decade" referring to those born in1360s of the Iranian calendar, or the 1980s of the Gregorian calendar), *daheh-ye haftādi-hā* ("of the seventies decade" referring to those born in the 1370s in the Iranians calendar, or the 1990s of the Gregorian Calendar), *nasl-e sevom* (the Third Generation), *khāmushi* (the "quiet," referring to the electrical blackouts that occurred during the missile attacks of the Iran-Iraq War), or *nasl-e sūkhteh* (the

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typically corresponds with the 21st of March of the Gregorian calendar. The modern Iranian calendar ties Persian and Islamic tradition. Each year starts with Nowruz (the pre-Islamic Persian holiday celebrating the beginning of Spring and the New Year), while the names of months hail from the ancient Achaemenid era, but the start point of the calendar is set at 622 AD, the year of the Islamic Hijrah. For example, this dissertation was submitted in the spring of 2018 (in the Gregorian calendar), which corresponds with the Iranian year 1397.

[13] Shahram Khosravi, *Young and Defiant in Tehran* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 5.

[14] Khosravi, *Young and Defiant in Tehran*.

"burnt" generation). Behrouzan contends that the boundaries between these generational categories are undefined and constantly changing.[15] In this dissertation, I understand *daheh-ye shasti-hā* ("the decade of the sixties") to indicate the original Third Generation. This generation has no memory of pre-Revolutionary Iran, experienced the Iran-Iraq War as children and spent its formative years in the Post-War Era, which was characterized by a liberal market economy, consumer culture and later, unfettered virtual access to the outside world. I use the term "Millenial Generation" or "Millenial Iranians" when referring to both the *daheh-ye shasti-hā* (those of the '60s decade) and the *daheh-ye haftādī-hā* (those of the '70s decade). Similar to the Millenials of contemporary American society, the Iranian Millenial Generation is experiencing a prolonged phase of youth, due to a variety of factors, including: an extended education duration, protracted unemployment, delayed independence from parents and the inability to start one's own family unit.[16] The present work, then, seeks to examine youth culture, as espoused by Iran's Millenial Generation, specifically as it emerged throughout the Ahmadinejad presidency.

While Behrouzan was the first to theorize the distinction between the post-revolution generations, and Khosravi noted the difference between the 1360s and 1370s generations, the term *daheh-ye shasti-hā* has been around since the early 2000s (1380s). It came into prominence when those Iranians who were born in that decade had grown up and identified themselves as such. I, myself, first heard the term in 2009, when I became active in the Iranian graduate student community of my hometown. I specifically recall the *daheh-ye shasti* themed parties that they would have, in which everyone would dress in the fashion of the 1360s/1980s and

[15] Orkideh Behrouzan, *Prozak Diaries: Psychiatry and Generational Memory in Iran* (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 2016): 30.
[16] Khosravi, *Precarious Lives*, 74.

would listen/dance to nostalgic music from that time.[17] Because my research examines media texts that appeal to Iranians of both the sixties and the seventies generations, and involves interviews with Iranians from both decades (albeit more so with the 1360s generation), I mostly use the term "Millenial Generation" throughout this study, although I do sometimes mention the Third Generation, particularly when referring to events of particular significance to *daheh-ye shashtī-hā*.

Romanticizing Resistance: The Trends in Iranian Youth Culture Studies

The urban life of young people in Iran has only recently begun to pique the interest of scholars. In 2006, Roxanne Varzi published *Warring Souls* and initiated the study of post-Revolution Iranian youth in the American academy. Two years later, Shahram Khosravi published *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, a seminal work on the subject of the Iranian Third Generation, and in 2009 Pardis Mahdavi published *Passionate Uprisings: Iran's Sexual Revolution*, a highly criticized ethnography of the prevalent sexual practices of Tehrani youth. Most recently, Shahram Khosravi published *Precarious Lives: Waiting and Hope in Iran* in 2017, which examines Iranian youth culture as it has emerged throughout the past decade. These aforementioned works, however, all reflect the tendency in Iranian youth studies to identify the practice of certain socio-cultural trends as an indication of struggle against the state, which is a reflection of the current trend in social science scholarship to romanticize resistance.

Even before the advent of youth culture studies, "resistance" was valorized in other fields within Iranian studies, as exemplified by Erika Friedl's article "Sources of Female Power in Iran," which was part of an anthology written in the early 1990s about women in Iran. In this

[17] In fact, I contend that the film *Nahang-e Anbar* owes its immense popularity to the sense of nostalgia that it tapped among the 1360s generation.

article, Friedl discusses various means through which women are able to exercise their power in post-Revolution Iran, and places resistance at the top of the list (which also included work, religion and government). She concludes that despite its limited benefits, resistance is the single most used tactic of power utilized by women in the Islamic Republic. Later, in a reflective article on the pitfalls of longitudinal ethnographic research, Friedl addresses her own complicity in perpetuating the romanticization of resistance within the study of anthropology.[18] She contends that this occurred as part of the ultrarelativist movement in her field, in which women's narratives were touted as stories of agency and empowerment. In retrospect, Friedl refers to her article as "an embarrassing example of straining the idea of women's power, in which I labored mightily to convince myself that women in Iran after the Revolution, although largely disenfranchised, had many power possibilities."[19] Friedl's open admittance of her contribution to this outdated trend is highly commendable and should be applied to the field of Iranian youth culture studies.

Pardis Mahdavi's *Passionate Uprisings*, which Laura Secor refers to as a "thinly academized memoir of the Iranian party scene,"[20] and which Hamid Dabashi takes jabs at for being an account of Mahdavi's summer vacation experiences in Iran, is a prime example of this trite notion of "resistance" as the overarching theme present in a majority of academic works

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[18] In "Stories of Ethnograhpic Dillema in Longitudinal Research," Friedl elucidates how such a trend emerged in anthropology. She describes herself as a product of neopositive European social science of the 1960s, in which there was very little appreciation for narratives as told by women. The 1970s, however, witnessed the burgeoning of feminism and the inception of gender studies, thus providing social scientists with the tools to take notice of women, albeit through the lens of oppression. As Friedl states, "Marxist and critical literature gave us the concepts, the vocabulary and the focus. We loved stories of oppression." However, as Friedl describes, these "sob and sorrow" stories soon aroused the ire of their very subjects, who objected to these imposed representations that had been colored by Western feminism, colonialism, orientalism and hegemony. Friedl credits Elizabeth Fernea (1977) for pioneering the movement away from ethnocentrism in anthropology, and permitting Middle Eastern women to speak for themselves.

[19] Erika Friedl, "Stories as Ethnographic Dilemma in Longitudinal Research," *Anthropology and Humanism*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2004): 5-21.

[20] Laura Secor, "Stolen Kisses," *Nation*, December 15, 2008, 25-29.

dealing with Iranian youth culture. In *Passionate Uprisings*, Mahdavi claims that a self-defined sexual revolution has taken place in Tehran and other urban centers of Iran. She maintains that trends among youth in Iran are not so much dictated by fashion or peer pressure, but actually have an "intellectual architecture" as well as a political stance behind them. She observes that young Iranians use their bodies and their sexualities to speak out against the repressive regime, attacking it by creating a state of *fitna* (moral chaos) to undermine the regime's moral fiber.[21] Similar to Asef Bayat's argument in *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Mahdavi emphasizes the politicization of quotidian life. She argues that walking in the streets of Tehran in styles of dress that defy Islamic codes, or holding hands with a person to whom one is not married, could be viewed as a collective, nonverbal demonstration that occurs every day in Iran.[22] Mahdavi concludes that the sexual revolution described by her informants is a surrogate means to express political dissent and that this creative alternative has also resulted in a shift in Iranian attitudes about sexuality and the body.

What *Passionate Uprisings* contributes to the field of Iranian youth culture is the contention that a new sexual culture has emerged in Iran. Attitudes toward virginity are indeed adjusting to accommodate the changes in sexual and social relations that have been enacted by the youth.[23] Furthermore, Mahdavi's theorization of markers of bodily revolt in public space deserves due merit. Negar Mottahedeh, in her work on the 2009 election and social media, cites Mahdavi when referring to "the manicured nails, the threaded eyebrows, [and] the strand of hair that shows on the veiled forehead," as acts of corporal and sexualized defiance.[24] On the other hand, Nahid Siamdoust asserts that the easing up of the public atmosphere is the result of

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[21] Pardis Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings: Iran's Sexual Revolution* (California: Stanford University Press, 2009), 8.
[22] Ibid., 300.
[23] Ibid., 154.
[24] Negar Mottehadeh, *#iranelection: Hashtag Solidarity and the Transformation of Online Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 97.

"chronological distance from the revolution itself and from the war years."[25] Siamdoust's contention, then, inspires the question of whether or not Mahdavi's study qualifies as an ethnography of resistance. Mahdavi claims that her informants refer to their actions as intentional resistance, asserting that Iranian youth characterize their own behaviors as part of a larger project to change the socio-political climate of the country, as well as traditional attitudes toward sex.[26] While I acknowledge the emergence of a new sexual culture in today's Iran, I am less inclined to view participation in this culture as an act of intentional resistance against the state. My own research findings validate Siamdoust's contention, that the relaxing of social strictures in Iran is more an effect of time. In this context, Iran's Millenial Generation's exploration of sex and sexuality is not indicative of a sexual revolution or even conscious defiance; rather, it demonstrates behaviors typical of adolescents and young adults, exercised within an evolving theocratic framework.

In *Precarious Lives*, Khosravi cogently argues against Mahdavi's claim of a sexual revolution in Iran by comparing it to the sexual liberation movement of the West. He notes that sexual liberation in the West was interwoven with other progressive movements, such as the anti-Vietnam War protests, class struggles, the civil rights movement and feminism. Certainly, there is merit in part of Khosravi's contention; the isolation of Iran's sexual liberation movement from feminism (a movement which has not yet fully developed in Iran) is what renders the term "sexual revolution" inapplicable, and by extension negates the idea of sexuality as an act of resistance.[27] In *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, however, Khosravi contends that the Islamic Regime represents a pastoral power, against which the Third Generation has developed a

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[25] Nahid Siamdoust, *Soundtrack of the Revolution: The Politics of Music in Iran* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 2.
[26] Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings*, 182.
[27] Khosravi, *Precarious Lives*, 50.

"culture of defiance." He claims that because the authorities in Iran suppress young people regardless of their socioeconomic class status, Iranian youth culture is the same throughout all sectors of society.[28] He also asserts that Iranian youth culture varies more by generation than by class, contending that the hegemonic order created by the paternal generation has caused the homogenization of young people's demands.[29] In *Precarious Lives*, Khosravi builds on the argument that he proposed in *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, of an Iranian youth culture characterized by resistance. He describes his latest work as "an ethnography of hope," and locates this hope not only in cinema, music and graffiti, but also in what he defines as various acts of defiance, such as new urban practices/visibilities, social movements and political manifestations.

The prevalent trend in Iranian youth culture studies, therefore, continues to be a romanticization of resistance. Zuzanna Olszewska writes a brilliant and insightful article about this trend and refers to Khosravi, Varzi and Mahdavi. She states, "These and other accounts published around this time seem to have in common a strong tendency to focus on social phenomena that are interpreted as acts of resistance and rebellion against the political establishment and the moral order it espouses," pointing to the fact that a scholar's interpretation is based on his or her judgment, and therefore is not necessarily an axiom.[30] Olszewska also notes that this trend extends to other fields in Iranian studies, citing Hamid Dabashi's historical survey, *Iran: A People Interrupted*, in which he states, "To me the story of modern Iran is one of defiance and rebellion against tyranny and globalized colonialism."[31] Olszewska's referral to the

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[28] Khosravi, *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, 4.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Zuzanna Olszewska, "Classy Kids and Down-at-Heel Intellectuals: Status Aspirations and Blind Spots in the Contemporary Ethnography of Iran," *Iranian Studies* 46, no. 6 (2013): 841-862.
[31] Hamid Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 7.

most well known scholars in the field as examples of what she argues against demonstrates the salience of this trend.

Norma Claire Moruzzi also finds fault in the ethnographic works that glorify resistance. In "Paradise Lost, Gone Shopping," Moruzzi specifically takes issue with Khosravi's *Young and Defiant in Tehran*. She notes that the resistance trend is part of the prevailing strategy for commentary on contemporary Iranian youth and women, in which a binary is presented with the 1979 Revolution as the historical breaking point.[32] In this review, Moruzzi contends that the Western-style shopping behavior of young Iranians and their defiance of traditional culture norms, which Khosravi contends are a form of resistance, should actually be taken as evidence of a new Iranian Identity. Moruzzi rightly criticizes Khosravi's ethnography for its dearth of women's voices, and asks whether the "defiant" culture that prevails in urban shopping centers is truly more democratic than that which occurs in the traditional bazaar. In "Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire," Moruzzi expands on this issue. She observes that despite looser adherence to the Islamic strictures imposed on Iranian society and a decline of traditional patriarchy, Iranian women continue to endure a very blatant gender discrimination, which exposes them to a new form of sexual violence. In her analysis of competing and overlapping discourses on sexuality in today's Iran, Moruzzi asserts that changes in lifestyle, language and dress are not necessarily areas of collective or individual resistance, referring to the claim that participation in the all-night Hussein Parties constitute as such. She concludes that liberated attitudes toward social freedom, which are interpreted by Khosravi and Mahdavi as indications of resistance, in tandem with the masculinist conceptions of social morality that prevail in Iranian society, have in fact contributed to the perpetuation of women's disenfranchisement in Iran. Moruzzi asserts that while Iranian youth are frustrated and fed up with the implications of their parents' Revolution,

[32] Norma Claire Moruzzi, "Paradise Lost, Gone Shopping,"*The Politics of Youth* (MERIP 245), Vol. 37 (2007).

and have thus embraced new behaviors and trends as a means to free themselves from its moral and political objectives, they have not yet to successfully dismantled the traditional gender inequalities that continue to persist in modern forms. Moruzzi's argument, then, does not correlate the current trends among Iranian youth with a resistance movement, but rather as a means to assert an identity independent from that of the previous generation.

Olszewska, on the other hand, argues against the trend of privileging "resistance" to an oppressive state as a theoretical framework, in favor of a class-based reading.[33] Contrary to Khosravi, who claims that Iranian youth culture varies more by generation than by class, Olszewska argues that cultural practices are correlated to class. She points to working-class Iranian girls' mimicry of upper class fashions as an example of aspiration toward upward mobility, rather than an avowed defiance of the state's imposed norms of modesty.[34] The concept of class has always played a role in modern Iranian culture, as Olszewska demonstrates by discussing the significance of class as reflected in the Persian language, stating:

> Something desirable because it is beautiful, fashionable, elegant and redolent of wealth and good taste is described with the adjective *bā-kelās*, literally "with class" or "classy," a gloss which carries the same dual meaning in English. An action through which one may be perceived as being of high status, or in the negative sense, "showing off" a particular high-status attribute is called *kelās gozāshtan*, literally "putting [on] class." Conversely, it is an insult, a marker of undesirability and inferiority to call someone *dehāti*—literally a "peasant" or a "bumpkin" or "rustic."[35]

My own findings reiterate the significance of class in contemporary Iranian society, as upward socio-economic mobility is mentioned as the primary incentive for many of the trends prevalent among the Third Generation. Following Olszewska, Moruzzi and Friedl, then, I situate my work in opposition to the emphasis on resistance that has so far dominated studies of Iranian youth,

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[33] Olszewska, "Classy Kids and Down-at-Heel Intellectuals."
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid., 850.

and contend that since the Reform Era until the contemporary period, Iranian youth culture has increasingly become defined by its aspirations of social mobility.

In her article, also entitled "Passionate Uprisings," Mahdavi touches on the matter of class mimicry as discussed by Olszewska. She notes that historically, social movements in Iran have started within particular groups and classes and have trickled down to the rest of society. She identifies the young "nonreligious middle class" of Iran's major urban centers as one such group, thereby justifying her focus on this sector. She makes brief mention of this fact when describing how this demographic is both of interest and feared by the Islamic State, referring to Rafsanjani's recruitment of young, middle-class Iranians to help run his 2005 presidential campaign. I distinctly remember my grandmother describing how she would see young girls with Rafsanjani's name written across their faces, scurrying about the streets of Tehran during the 2005 presidential election period. My inclusion of this memory demonstrates the autobiographical bent that Olszewska observes in Iranian studies, a subject that is thoroughly unpacked by Amy Motlagh in her article.

In "Autobiography in the Writings of the Iranian Diaspora," Motlagh observes that it has become common for scholars of Iranian studies to situate their personal story within the greater context of the historical conflict between the United States and Iran. She asserts that the line between scholarly writing and memoir has increasingly become blurred in the works produced by Iranian-American scholars in the previous decade.[36] As an example, she refers to Mahdavi, who is a child of Iranian immigrants who came to the United States on the eve of the revolution. Motlagh also acknowledges that, despite the barrage of vitriol spewed at Azar Nafisi (author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*) regarding her collaboration with neoconservative

[36] Amy Motlagh, "Autobiography and Authority in the Writings of the Iranian Diaspora," Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East 31, no 2 (2011): 412.

warmongers, elitist academics (e.g. Dabashi) are equally guilty of establishing their authority through the mechanism of memoir. For example, she observes that Dabashi begins his *Iran: A People Interrupted* by recounting his childhood in Ahvaz, thereby positioning himself as an authentic Iranian and flexing his authority, both as an academic and a native of Iran. Motlagh also mentions another staunch critic of Nafisi, Fatemeh Keshavarz, who like Dabashi utilizes the same technique that she castigates. She notes how Keshavarz reassures her readers that she is in close and frequent contact with Iran and can therefore speak to the situation of the country with greater authority.[37] Motlagh concludes that diasporic intellectuals are inclined to intensify, and therefore privilege, their personal experience of the home country at the expense of the subjectivity of those whom they represent.

Drawing on Motlagh's article, I strive to distance my work from that of such scholars as Mahdavi, who interweave their personal experiences into their work under the guise of participant observation. I also wish to distance myself from scholars such as Dabashi and Keshavarz, who use their authenticity as native Iranians to bolster their authority, only to take down those whom they deem unqualified to make academic assertions about Iran. Certainly there are advantages to hailing from the country in which and about which one conducts research, but there is a fine line between using it to present relevant information and using it to tout oneself as an inviolable expert. In my work, I try to find a balance between Motlagh's criticism of "native" based authority and the advantages that my Iranian heritage affords me, which I will explain in the following section.

[37] Ibid, 416.

Methodology

This project originally began as a work looking at humor in contemporary Iranian pop culture. I was specifically interested in media texts that were popular among the post-Revolution generation. At some point my adviser discerned that my interest was not so much humor in media, but rather the people to whom it appealed. He suggested that I include interviews about the media texts that I had analyzed. I completed the IRB process and received permission to conduct interviews with 10-12 Iranians, outside of Iran. During my first interview, my questions about the media text that I had chosen to discuss gave way to a plethora of information about life in Iran in the post-Reform period. From there, my project transformed into a study of Iranian youth culture, guided by examples of humor in contemporary Iranian media. For my original project idea, I had proposed to look at humor in three different types of media: social media, television and film. Based on the popularity of a particular Internet animation, "Postmodern Beggars" (which I will examine thoroughly in Chapter Three), I had decided to use Sooriland cartoons as the social media text that I would analyze for this work. For the chapter looking at television I had chosen Mehran Modiri's *Shūkhī Kardam*, which at the time of my research was very popular among the cohort of young Iranians that I was a part of. Oftentimes at gatherings, someone would pull out their cellphone to show a particular *Shūkhī Kardam* clip that they had found amusing. Simultaneously, many clips of the show were posted and shared by Iranians within my social media network, so that I began to associate it with the type of humor that resonated with the post-Revolution generation of Iranians. For my film chapter, I had intended to use the comedy *Nahang-e Anbar* (Sperm Whale), which came out in 2015 and again enjoyed great popularity among the demographic of interest, as I observed through the comments made about the film within my network (both online, and in person).

The addition of interviews, however, guided my work (and interest!) toward oral history. In retrospect, had I known that this change in direction would occur, I would have arranged for more interviews with a larger sample size. Even so, my thorough and in-depth interviews with my eleven informants revealed unique information about the youth culture of middle to upper class, educated Iranians from various urban centers in Iran (which in itself is significant, as the majority of Iranian youth culture studies tend to be Tehrancentric) and how that culture has evolved since the turn of the twenty-first century.

In consideration of my limited time and permitted sample size, I carefully chose a diverse set of interviewees from various urban locales and socioeconomic standings in Iran to inform this study of Iranian youth culture. My study is limited to the urban youth culture that prevails among educated, middle to upper class Iranians, because, as I contend, this is the demographic that will shape Iran's political, social and cultural future. My evidence for this project is not based on participant observation, but rather on the oral histories that I derived from interviewing my informants. My informants are Millenial Generation Iranians who have recently come to the United States, within the last eight years, either as permanent residents or graduate students.

My status as a second-generation Iranian-American allowed me to engage with my informants on a deeper, more intimate level than someone whom they would deem a *khāreji* (foreigner/not Iranian). At the same time, I am also someone whom they do not consider one of their own, and so they felt more comfortable and at ease to speak confidently about their thoughts, opinions and experiences. This is specifically due to my unique position as a second generation Iranian-American. My fluent Persian conversational skills inspired more intimacy and therefore encouraged the divulgence of information. My status as an "outsider" rendered me as a nonjudgmental figure; my informants felt that they could share information with me that

they would not so readily reveal to their own peers. One comment that was made to me by several of my informants (as well as other Iranians who were not interviewed for this project, but are of the demographic under examination) is that I am easy to talk to because they can use Persian to convey their precise sentiments, without fear of judgment or possible repercussions within the Iranian community. This is an advantage that I have as a scholar of Iranian youth culture, and it is reinforced by my ability to relate to my informants based on our shared generational status, or our "youthfulness."[38] These qualities permit me to conduct research in a more effective manner and produce more accurate results than scholars such as Khosravi, who, based on his age and native status, may not inspire complete confidence in his informants. However, Khosravi compensates for this shortcoming with a greater number of interviews than I was able to obtain within my designated time frame.

I reached out to most of my informants on social media (either through Facebook or Instagram) and asked if I could interview them for this project. While one of the informants is a close friend, the rest are acquaintances that I had met within the Iranian student community. Two of my informants were friends of people whom I had interviewed; after they heard about their friends' interviews with me, they asked if they could be interviewed as well and included in the study. I met with my informants in very casual settings. The couples invited me over to their homes for tea and fruit/dessert (as per the dictates of Persian culture), while I met the rest of my informants at venues of their choice. This was typically a coffee shop, although one informant asked to meet for happy hour at the university bar. Interviews lasted anywhere from one to three

[38] As a young, single, Iranian-American woman, close in age to my informants, I boasted an analogous position with Mahdavi. In her article, "Passionate uprisings: Young people, sexuality and politics in post-revolutionary Iran," she mentions similar advantages, stating, "Some felt that because I was from oon taraf-e āb (the other side of the water) that I was not likely to judge them and would be less apt to "tattletale" or tell someone who might know them. Others were fascinated by me, feeling that my status as an Iranian0American was something that allowed me deeper insight and this fascination proved to be mutually beneficial."

hours per sitting. Those with whom I had shorter interviews, I met with twice. I conducted the interviews in Persian and asked that my informants also respond in Persian (as some would try to speak in English at first). I recorded approximately twenty hours of interviews, which, I myself translated and transcribed (simultaneously). As anyone who has done this can attest, it is an incredibly slow and painstaking process. One hour of Persian interview would take me approximately eight to ten hours to translate and transcribe.

As this work examines contemporary youth culture in Iran, I limited my interviews to the Millenial Generation (as defined above). I am aware that inclusion of interviews with the parental generation would have been a valuable addition to this work, but I was confined by both time and IRB authorization for this project. I do, however, intend to expand the scope of this work to include a greater sample size and generational variety, as a post-doctoral project, if given the opportunity.

Cast of Characters

As I mentioned above, I had received IRB permission to interview 10-12 Iranians. Therefore, I was very selective regarding the people whom I sought to interview for this project. I tried to put together a diverse sample of educated, middle to upper class Iranians that would represent a nuanced, yet accurate cross-section of the Third Generation. I conducted interviews with eleven informants, six men and five women, hailing from three large metropolitan areas and two smaller cities, from the north to south of Iran. Brief biographies of my informants follow, although I changed their names for the sake of maintaining their anonymity.

Hadi is a thirty-five year old man who was born in Isfahan and raised in Shahr-e Kord (approximately one hundred kilometers from Isfahan) by what he describes as a middle class and

"ordinary" family. In 2000, Hadi's family moved to Tehran, but he remained in his hometown to attend Isfahan University of Technology, where he studied computer engineering from 2000-2006, for his undergraduate degree. After completing his mandatory military service in 2009, he attended Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran for a master's degree in computer science. In 2012, Hadi and his wife moved to the United States, both to pursue their doctoral degrees. Hadi earned his PhD in 2018 and currently works for the Ford Motor Company.

Mostafa is a twenty-seven year old man from North Tehran (the Ajūdānīeh neighborhood in the Niāvarān district). He describes his family as upper class; his father is a major stockholder. Mostafa attended Amir Kabir University (which he describes as "the most politically active university in Iran") from 2008 to 2013, and obtained his undergraduate degree in civil engineering. In 2014, he came to the United States to continue his graduate education at a university in California. After his first year abroad, he returned to Iran to marry his fiancée, Hannah, and brought her back to the United States. Currently Mostafa is a graduate student in the department of Hydrology at a university in the American Southwest.

Hannah is also from an "upper class" family, hailing from the affluent Zafarānīeh neighborhood in North Tehran. Her father was a prominent factory owner until the Ahmadinejad administration. She attended the Islamic Azad University of Tehran, where she studied drawing. Hannah and Mostafa met through mutual friends when Hannah was in her last year of high school. Currently, she is twenty-six years old and is a student at the local culinary institute.

Sohrab is an artist in his early forties and hails from Ahvaz. He moved to Tehran at the age of eighteen to attend university and graduated with a Bachelor of Art degree in photography. After completing his military service, Sohrab continued his education and earned a master's degree in photography. While living in Iran, Sohrab worked as a professional photographer and

cinematic artist, specializing in filmmaking and set design. He also worked for a documentary-based television program called *Hezār rāh-e narafteh*, which focused on the psychology of Iranian families. Sohrab came to the United States in 2011, accompanying his wife, Sepideh, who had been accepted to a doctoral program.

Sepideh is in her late thirties and comes from what she describes as a "very traditional" middle class family in Tehran. She studied Teaching English as a Second Language for her undergraduate degree at the Islamic Azad University, and received her master's degree in the same field at al-Zahra University (Iran's only comprehensive all women's university). Currently she is a PhD candidate in the college of education, at a university in the Southwestern United States.

Vashti is a thirty-year-old PhD candidate, studying geophysics at a university in the American Southwest. She was born in Tehran to what she describes as a middle class family, but moved to Isfahan in her youth. She spent the majority of her life in Iran, including her university years, in Isfahan and calls it her hometown. Vashti attended Isfahan University of Technology, where she earned her bachelor's degree in 2009 and her master's degree in 2011, both in the field of mining engineering. She then came to the United States in 2012 to pursue her doctoral degree.

Similarly, Pooneh was born in Tehran, but moved to Isfahan with her family at a young age. She moved back to the capital, however, to pursue her education at the University of Tehran, where she studied Persian literature. She earned her Bachelor's degree in 2006 and her master's degree in 2009. In 2009, Pooneh came to the United States on a student visa, but became an American citizen through her marriage to an Iranian immigrant (which ended in divorce). Currently she is a PhD candidate in Middle Eastern and North African Studies,

specializing in medieval Persian literature and teaches Persian at a university in the Midwestern United States.

Sara is a twenty-four year old graduate architecture student at a university in the American Southwest. She comes from a middle class family and was born and raised in Shiraz, where she attended the University of Shiraz for her undergraduate degree in architecture. Sara adamantly described herself as a young woman from the "seventies generation," of post-Revolution Iranian youth (as opposed to the "sixties generation").

Hamid is a twenty-nine year old recent graduate of a university in the Southwestern United States. He was born and raised in Hamadan, and hails from a middle class family. In 2007, he moved to the capital to attend the University of Tehran for his undergraduate degree and obtained his bachelor's degree in mineral processing and mining engineering. Hamid came to the United States in 2015 to pursue his doctoral education, but opted to master out of his program in 2017. He accepted a job offer and is currently working as an engineer for a mine in Southern Arizona.

Omid is a thirty-four year old man, born and raised in Tehran and from a middle-class family. He attended Semnan University for both his undergraduate and graduate degrees in mechanical engineering. Semnan is a province east of Tehran, and is approximately a two-hour drive from the capital. During his undergraduate studies, Omid lived in Semnan, but moved back to the capital following his graduation. After a year of working, Omid resumed his education at Semnan University, but commuted from Tehran throughout the duration of his master's program. In 2010, Omid came to the United States to pursue his doctoral studies and graduated with his PhD in mechanical engineering in 2018. Despite having a middle class background, Omid describes the majority of his friends and social network in Iran as "upper

class." He attributes this to the fact that his local high school was one of the best in the region, to which many affluent families would send their children. Furthermore, Omid's parents both worked for IranAir, his mother boasting a managerial position. This put him in a unique situation, according to Omid, in that he was exposed to people who were frequent travelers and therefore had a more "open" mindset. For this reason, Omid describes his upbringing as somewhat unconventional and not very characteristic of the typical middle class Tehrani family.

Hamrah is a thirty-three year old man of a middle class background. He was born in Ahvaz, where he lived until the age of twelve and at which point he moved with his family to Tehran. After a couple of years, Hamrah's family moved to Karaj (a suburb of Tehran). After graduating high school, Hamrah moved back to Tehran, where he attended a trade school and studied Internet technology. At the age of twenty-two, Hamrah moved to Italy to pursue his bachelor's degree abroad. There, he studied communications and multimedia at Ferrara University, while running a corner store. At the age of thirty, Hamrah returned to Iran to spend a year of leisure with his friends and family back "home" before immigrating to the United States.

The Making of the Millenial Generation: A Background History

The earliest years of the Islamic Republic experienced an economic crisis, which precipitated the collapse of capitalism in the country and the rise of the petty bourgeoisie in traditional occupations.[39] In 1976 the middle class was incredibly small, as it consisted of only 477,000 Iranians or 5.7% of the employed work force.[40] After the Revolution, the incipient theocracy strove to establish an Islamic (and therefore supposedly just) economic system, in

[39] Farhad Nomani and Sohrab Behdad, *Class and Labor in Iran: Did the Revolution Matter?* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 87.
[40] Farhad Nomani and Sohrab Behdad, "The Rise and Fall of Iranian Classes in the Post-Revolutionary Decades," *Middle Eastern Studies* 44:3 (2008), 377-396.

which profit-making, foreign investment and loans were discouraged, while widespread antagonist social expressions against wealth hindered capitalist relations of production.[41] This resulted in the expansion of petty commodity economic activity, and the de-proletarianization of labor, which was reflected in the decreased size of the working class and a remarkable expansion of petty bourgeois and service activities in the urban and rural economies. State employment expanded, particularly in the country's military and paramilitary forces. Between 1976-1986, more than 1.1 million people were added to the political functionaries of the state; over 800,000 joined the military (the Revolutionary Guards) and paramilitary (*Komiteh* and *Basij*) forces. While the disruption in capitalist relations of production disenfranchised a substantial portion of the working class, some found employment in petty commodity production, while others joined the newly established organs of state coercion, which became prevalent during this period of domestic political instability and war with Iraq.[42] In the mid 1980s, the saturation of the global oil market and the war with Iraq placed Iran under severe financial duress. Thus, when Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani took office of in 1989, he instituted a policy of reconstruction. During Rafsanjani's presidential tenure (1989-1997) Iran adopted an economic liberalization strategy that strove to reinvigorate capitalist means of production.[43] This liberalization strategy once again promoted a trickle-down economic policy, encouraged profit-making ventures and wooed foreign investments.[44] The 1990s, therefore, witnessed the gradual return of the petty bourgeoisie in non-traditional sectors and modern capitalists, which resulted in the expansion of the Iranian middle class.

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[41] Ibid., 382.
[42] Ibid., 384.
[43] Nomani and Behdad, *Class and Labor in Iran*, 196.
[44] Ibid., 197-197.

The populist, revolutionary Islamic state also pursued an aggressive education expansion policy, which involved building schools in impoverished and rural areas, and enforcing gender-segregation of primary and secondary schools. These policies resulted in near universal literacy rates among both girls and boys,[45] and have ultimately produced a Millenial Generation that is generally more literate and educated than their parents. As such, this demographic is one that has the expectation of appropriate and corresponding employment opportunities and upward socioeconomic mobility. However, the already saturated state bureaucracy and a lackadaisical private sector have been unable to absorb the university diploma wielding youth bulge, a combined result of the Islamic Republic's early investment in education and its pro-natal policies.[46]

Iran's population rose from thirty-three million in 1976 to almost eighty million in 2016. Before the Revolution, the Shah's government advocated family planning and having fewer children. In 1967, the Pahlavi government launched its first official population policy, and in 1970 it proclaimed an aim of reducing population growth to one percent within twenty years. In 1973, first trimester abortions were legalized, and the Ministry of Public Health promoted and distributed contraceptives through a network of family planning clinics.[47] After the Revolution, the clerical government deemed birth control, abortions and preventative measures un-Islamic and banned contraceptives and abortions, which also became a means to produce more soldiers for the Iran-Iraq War. By the mid 1980s, the population growth rate in Iran had reached four percent. After the end of the Iran-Iraq war and Khomeini's death in 1989, then-president

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[45] P. Higgins and P. Shoar-Ghaffari, "Women's Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *In the Eye of the Storm: Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, ed. Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl (London, 2004): 19-43.
[46] Ervand Abrahamian, "Why the Islamic Republic Has Survived," MER 250: The Islamic Revolution, Vol. 39 (Spring 2009), http://www.merip.org/mer/mer250/why-islamic-republic-has-survived, accessed October 4, 2017.
[47] Hoda Hoodfar, "Devices and Desires," Gender, Population and Environment: The Middle East beyond the Cairo Conference (MER 190), Vol. 24 (1994).

Rafsanjani instituted a family planning initiative to once again lower the population. During Rafsanjani's presidency, consultation and services for contraceptive methods were offered throughout country, and the only condom factory in the Middle East was built in Iran.[48] Regardless of these Reconstruction Era measures, nearly twenty-two million (21,954,053) Iranians were born during the 1980s (1360s), thus comprising twenty-three percent of the current population.[49] Behrouzan reports a much higher figure, claiming that the children of the 1980s comprise three-quarters of Iran's population today.[50]

The dearth of opportunities to achieve goals and the subsequent failure to meet one's own expectations and those of society is the hallmark of neoliberal capitalism.[51] Iranian Millenials are therefore caught in limbo, as the state touts the ideals of neoliberalism, while hindering a functional civil society. Failed economic expectations are only one factor that characterizes and has contributed to the formation of Iran's Millenial Generation. The other salient feature of this demographic is its relationship with media and technology.

Post-Revolution Iranian Media and the Millenial Generation

Mehdi Semati breaks down post-revolutionary Iranian media into four distinct phases: 1) The War Years 2) The Reconstruction Era 3) the Reform Era 4) the Post-Reform Era.[52] The first period begins with the establishment of the Islamic Republic and continues until the end of the war with Iraq. The War Years were marked by revolutionary fervor, ideological governance and

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[48] Marie Ladier-Fouladi, "Sociodemographic Changes in the Family and Their Impact on the Sociopolitical Behavior of the Youth in Postrevolutionary Iran," in *Iran: From Theocracy to the Green Movement*, ed. by Negin Navabi (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 140.
[49] Khosravi, *Precarious Lives*, 60.
[50] Behrouzan, *Prozak Diaries*, 32.
[51] John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, "Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming," *Public Culture* 12, no. 2 (2011), 291-343.
[52] Mehdi Semati, "Introduction," in *Media, Culture and Society in Iran: Living with Globalization and the Islamic State*, edited by Mehdi Semati (London: Routledge, 2008), 4.

mass mobilization to support the war effort. This period corresponds with the 1360s; Iranians born in this decade often describe themselves as Children of the War and are the original Third Generation. The following period is the Reconstruction Era, which began with the end of the war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. During this period, then president Rafsanjani initiated a program of post-war reconstruction aimed at reforming the theocracy into a rational governing system, fostering economic reform and ending Iran's international isolation.[53] It was during the Reconstruction Era (1989-1997) that the media became a space in which alternative perspectives on politics, Islam and Islamic governance would be voiced. The next period was the Reform Era, which took place between 1997-2005 and was initiated by the election of Mohammad Khatami to the presidency. Khatami's platform rested on civil society and social reform, which translated as a greater openness for the media. The *daheyeh haftādīhā* were born in the 1370s, a decade which straddles the latter half of the Reconstruction Era and Khatami's first presidential term. The last period delineated by Semati is the Post-Reform Era, which began with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and continues to the present day. This period coincides with what media scholar Amanda Lotz has posited as the Post-Network Era.

In *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, Lotz defines the Post-Network Era as the period during which new convenience technologies and distribution methods emerged and expanded, liberating viewers from the dictates of network television, while increasing dependence on Internet technology. During this period, people no longer had to watch the television shows that networks aired at particular times. DVD sets, along with Internet-powered VOD (Video on Demand) services, online streaming and bit torrents allowed viewers to pick shows to watch at their own leisure.

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[53] Ibid.

In Iran, Post-Network practices and technologies have fostered a generation of "media agnostics," whose formative years were marked by access to new communication technologies such as satellite television, cellphones and the Internet.[54] This demographic largely ignores IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting) productions and instead focuses its attention on alternative media sources. New communication technologies provided the Millenial Generation with unfettered digital access to the outside world and facilitated a transnational flow of information, resulting in a technologically savvy population that is capable of virtually accessing and engaging with youth cultures around the world.[55] "Media agnosticism" not only characterized the Millenial Generation during the Ahmadinejad era, it also granted young Iranians with a unique power to act as a force of change within their society. As Henry Jenkins observes in *Spreadable Media*, the shift across media industries from communication to engagement-based models (the hallmark of the Post-Network Era) not only encouraged the expansion of media platforms, but more importantly it has functioned to highlight the significant role that audience participation plays in the creation of cultural value.

While increased dependence on handheld Internet technology is a global trend, it was during the Iranian Green Movement that it became associated with active resistance. The Iranian Green Movement was a political movement that arose with the declaration of Ahmadinejad as winner of the 2009 presidential election. During the Green Movement, Iranians took to the streets to protest the election results and demand the removal of Ahmadinejad from office.[56] The Green Movement protests were the largest in the Iran since the 1979 Revolution and thus comprise a major event in the history of the Islamic Republic. At the same time, the hashtag

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[54] Khosravi, *Precarious Lives*, 61.
[55] Ibid., 62.
[56] Initially, green had been the campaign color of Mir Hossein Mousavi, a presidential contender and Ahmadinejad's competitor in the 2009 election. During the uprising, the color green became associated with and used as the unifying symbol for those calling for the annulment of what they claimed was a fraudulent election.

#iranelection was the first long-trending international hashtag in Twitter's history.[57] Twitter, itself, played a key role in the organization of Green Movement protests, and after the 2009 uprising, it became clear that social media is a powerful tool. Post-Network Era practices and technologies, then, rendered the Millenial Generation a demographic of "media agnostics," who used their Internet and technological savvy to initiate and perpetuate the 2009 Green Movement. The Green Movement was therefore a Post-Network manifestation of the collective, Post-Reform frustration, anger, and disillusionment of Millenial Iranians.

A Post-Network, Post-Reform Commodity Culture

There is no denying that there have been instances in which Iran's Millenial Generation has utilized media technology in active resistance against the state. But the question remains: does this indicate a culture of resistance/defiance/revolution? Certainly, Iranian society has opened up since the 1979 Revolution, and the youth are consistently pushing the limits set by the regime to maintain the Islamic façade of the country. But this situation is not unique to Iran, as youth everywhere are at the forefront of socio-cultural change. As the demographic that eats the fruit of their parents' revolution, the Millenial Generation will naturally push for a more progressive and open society. To claim that this generation is consciously engaging in a "revolution" against the state, however, evokes the role of intent in resistance. Does a particular action in defiance of the state necessarily indicate resistance, if it is an act inspired by the trends that are popular amongst one's peers? My contention is that it does not. For this reason, my study does not look at Iranian youth culture through the lens of resistance. Instead, I focus on the trends that have evolved as Millenial Iranians engaged with the society, politics and culture of contemporary Iran. I do so by examining particular media texts that have an almost universal

[57] Mottahedeh, *#iranelection*, 17.

appeal to Iranian youth; they provide ample information about the socio-cultural trends that are prevalent in Millenial Iran. I utilized examples of these texts to springboard into in-depth conversations with a number of Millenial Iranians, particularly focusing on the socio-cultural shifts that have occurred throughout and as a result of Ahmadinejad's presidency.

Global shifts in the use of technology are certainly reflected in the habits of Iran's Millenial Generation. As my project reveals, the emergence of the Post-Network Era had a reverberating effect in Iran. I contend that the changes in media distribution methods, along with the resulting expectations of convenience and mobility that took place during the Ahmadinejad Era significantly impacted the formation of Iranian youth culture. I apply Jenkins's theory of spreadability to demonstrate how Millenial Iranians actually create cultural value through their engagement with and circulation of particular media texts. I then argue that the significance of new media technologies, specifically social media, lies in its role in the creation of contemporary culture. This is in direct opposition to the trend of privileging resistance in scholarship, which is reflected in works that laud the revolutionary power of new media technologies as potential tools for democratization. I further push back against this trend by rebutting the notion of an Iranian youth demographic characterized by a culture of defiance; instead, I point to the preponderance of commodity culture within contemporary Iranian society. I propose that an imagined concept of the Western World (*khārej*) prevails, which the Millenial Generation collectively strives to emulate, and I contend that it is this fanciful perception that drives many of the trends set by the urban elite. These trends, then, become markers of class and serve as a type of social currency that Millenial Iranians use to move in and out of various class groups. Ultimately, I argue that the normalization of convenience technologies, the adaptation of Post-Network media practices, the neoliberal economic policies of the Ahmadinejad administration and the sociopolitical

disenchantment of Iranian youth have all combined to create a circumstance in which class identity has become the definitive feature of Millenial Iran.

This dissertation has the goal of examining the socio-cultural context out of which Iran's urban, educated, middle to upper class Millenial Generation has emerged. I utilize media texts that were and continue to be exceedingly popular among Iranian youth in conjunction with a series of in-depth interviews to arrive at a conclusion regarding the characteristics of this demographic. The implications of my findings regarding the evolution of contemporary Iranian culture and society serves as a case study for the reconfiguration of social hierarchies in accommodation of a youth generation that is learning to leverage its technological literacy against traditional institutions of patriarchy. I argue, however, that Iranian youth culture is not defined by intentional political resistance, but rather the by class identity, in correlation with the globalizing effects of Internet technology within the restricted space of a repressive theocracy.

I derive the evidence for this dissertation from two specific sources that were and continue to be relevant to the Iran's Millenial Generation: Mehran Modiri's television series *Shūkhī Kardam*, which was not aired on IRIB but was instead distributed according to the new methods of the Post-Network Era, and Sooriland animations, that were first posted and circulated on Facebook and YouTube, but have since migrated over to Instagram and Telegram. I couple these texts with information that I gathered from eleven informants to produce this historical analysis of Millenial Iran, beginning with Khatami's reform movement and ending with Rouhani's election to a second term.

Chapter one sets up the premise of the dissertation, by explaining why the original Third Generation became so disillusioned. It delineates how this demographic went from feeling a sense of great hope with the election of Khatami in 1997, to a state of disenchantment by the end

of Ahmadinejad's second term. It was throughout this duration, however, that young Iranians became emboldened to realize their potential power as a socio-cultural and political force. Chapter two describes how the Post-Network Era manifested in Iran and how it tied into the anxieties of the Millenial Generation. Within this Post-Network framework, I present a critique of Iranian state television (IRIB) that serves to demonstrate the reason behind the collective disillusionment of Millenial Iranians, which continued to burgeon throughout the duration of the Ahmadinejad administration. Chapter three posits the Millenial Generation as the primary force behind the inauguration of the Post-Network Era in Iran. The participatory culture that evolved during the Green Movement within this demographic facilitated a new Iranian media environment. Through their embrace of Post-Network media practices and technologies, Millenial Iranians effectively precipitated the materialization of a commodity culture, which was reified by the neoliberal economic policies of the Ahmadinejad administration. Chapter four looks at how this commodity culture has manifested within trends that prevail among young Iranians today. This chapter uses media analysis and oral history to arrive at a definitive characterization of Millenial Iran. The project concludes with a brief commentary on the implications of this historical study of Iranian youth culture, for the present time and the future, particularly in light of the most recent spate of protests to occur in January of 2018.

From Hope to Hopelessness: Khatami to Ahmadinejad

In 1997, there was a seismic shift in the Iranian political scene. Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was finishing his second consecutive term as president, could not run for a third term according to the Islamic Republic's constitution. The conservative candidate was the well-known speaker of the Majles, Ali Akbar Nateq Nouri, who not only had been active in Iran's national politics since the Revolution, but also boasted the backing of the majority of the establishment. His opponent, the mild-mannered former Minister of Culture, Hojjat al-Islam Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, had been permitted to run by the Guardian Council with the assumption that he would lose. Instead, Khatami won a landslide victory with seventy percent of the vote, in which eighty percent of the eligible population (as opposed to the mere fifty percent that had participated in the last election) voted. Khatami won based on a platform of democracy, civil society, human rights and citizenship.[58]

Khatami's campaign had great appeal to Iran's Third Generation because he was a maverick; he readily admitted that the greater world outside of Iran is cosmopolitan and culturally diverse. This positioned him to be open to new ideas, particularly regarding Iran's limited outlets for social activity and entertainment.[59] Khatami's call for reform acknowledged the Third Generation's desire for greater freedoms, while simultaneously maintaining loyalty to the Islamic Republic and its theocratic system of government.

In this chapter, I position Khatami's presidency as the precipitate point for the materialization of Millenial as a legitimate force within Iranian society. Khatami's Reformist agenda and policies worked two fold, exposing this generation to the forces of globalization,

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[58] Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 186.
[59] Anoushiravan Ehtashami and Mahjoob Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of Its Neoconservatives: The Politics of Tehran's Silent Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 17.

while relaxing the impositions of moral strictures upon Iranian society. It was during Khatami's first term, for example, that the Internet became prevalent in Iran. However, the fast pace at which Iranian society was heading toward world integration (and away from the ideals of the Revolution) gave cause for concern to the conservative and traditionalist factions of the state. They engineered a counter-attack, first through a heavy-handed repression of Reformist organs and agents, and then through the creation of a neoconservative movement, whose front man was Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Ahmadinejad based his presidential platform in opposition to the Reformist ideals of religious democracy and citizenship, positioning himself against the voter contingency that had brought Khatami to power. His emphasis on social and economic justice appealed less to the already disillusioned urban Third Generation and more to the lower socio-economic classes, who were not particularly concerned with the definition of civil society or individual liberties. In the wake of the disenchanted apathy of a large contingent of Khatami's supporters who had witnessed their champion fail to follow through on his promises of reform, the right wing mobilized and was successful in bringing Ahmadinejad to office in 2005. His re-election in 2009, however, once again galvanized Millenial Iranians into action, as this demographic spearheaded the Green Movement. And while this uprising was initiated by claims of a fraudulent election, it was a social movement that reflected the Millenial Generation's anger and frustration with both the state and society. In this chapter, I contend that Khatami's election, presidency and endeavor to pull Iran out of its cultural isolation, served to embolden young Iranians to realize their potential power and to strive to initiate socio-cultural change in twenty-first century Iran.

Khatami: A New Hope

Khatami's election to the presidency in 1997 ushered in a euphoric sense of optimism among the Third Generation, a reverie that was inspired by the Reform Movement. The idea of reform allowed for improvement within the existing political framework. Mehran Kamrava asserts that Khatami's platform was actually based on a broader intellectual trend that attempted to reconcile Islam with democracy.[60] Ebrahim Yazdi claims that Khatami's 1997 election was an act of protest by Iranian society, an indication that Iranians were committed to the *velāyat-e faqih* political system, but also wanted change and improvement of their lives and the condition of the country.[61] Similarly, Ray Takeyh argues that the rise of the reform movement was a response to the ruling elites' imposition of stringent strictures that supposedly reflected the ideals of the Islamic Revolution of 1979.[62] This discontented demographic felt progressively more alienated by the government's rigidity and rhetoric. The Third Generation, which made up a substantial portion of the alienated public, were wooed by Khatami's platform of inclusion, as he stated, "Rather than estranging them, we must involve the youth in the policies and economic affairs of the country."[63] Khatami's ability to push the reform agenda forward and associate himself with the hopes and desires of the Iranian people was a key component to his success.

I asked Sohrab if he remembered what sense he had during the Khatami era. He responded:

> I remember that the spirit of hope had become very high. My own studies had finished and I was working on my master's thesis project, but also because my work, my professional work in the field of art, had begun to pick up and become more serious. I could see the passion and enthusiasm of the youth. Hope. I could sense that perfectly. It was the only time period that I felt [this], and it had a reason.

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[60] Mehran Kamrava, *Iran's Intellectual Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 120-172.
[61] Ebrahim Yazdi, *Se Jomhoori* (*Three Republics*), (Tehran: Jame'h Iranian, 1379/2000), 52-53.
[62] Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[63] *Salam*, April 8, 1997.

Sohrab's statement reflects how Khatami's first election imbued the Third Generation with a sense of hope and optimism. He also hints at how this hope positively affected his work as an artist. Hadi represents the excited youth whom Sohrab mentioned. I asked him how he felt during the Khatami era and he stated:

> '76 (1376/1997) was the first time that I could vote and we were really excited that Khatami was running. I remember when Khatami was elected, I would ask my dad, "When will I see him on television? When will he become president?" It was very exciting knowing that we had had a role in the election of someone.

Hadi's statement demonstrates the enthusiasm felt by the Third Generation as a significant contingent in the election of Khatami, as well as for the change that they believed he would bring to Iranian society.

The Second of Khordad Movement was named so after Khatami's presidential victory, which took place on the second day of the Iranian month, Khordad (May 23, 1997). This reformist movement had a number of clear goals to overhaul the Islamic Republic, including modernization of the Islamic Republic's strictures, the rationalization of the state's bureaucracy and the institution of a more accountable and responsive system of government. Essentially, this movement sought to bring Iran in line with the so-called modern states and systems of government predominant in the contemporary world.

The 1997 presidential election was remarkable because it was the first time in the history of the Islamic Republic that the Iranian people's demands overruled the preferences of the ruling elite. The clerical oligarchy had rallied behind conservative hardliner Nateq Nuri as the candidate of choice. Khatami's overwhelming victory demonstrated how an increased literacy,

urbanization and women's participation in the workforce functioned to change the electorate to one that reflected a more informed and involved citizenry.[64]

As president, Khatami appointed Ataollah Mohajerani as the new Minister of Culture, a move that incensed the conservative hardliners.[65] Previously, as Rafsanjani's vice president, Mohajerani had enraged the right wing with his suggestion to resume relations with the United States. As the new Minister of Culture, Mohajerani demonstrated a commitment to relaxing the censorship laws that governed all forms of cultural expression, including theater, books and most importantly, newspapers.[66] One of Khatami's most significant achievements, as president, was his modernization and liberalization of the media. The press's vital role as the most effective means of mobilizing public opinion during Khatami's presidency has been well documented; it is also the defining characteristic of the Reform era. Under Mohajerani, in 1998 alone, eight hundred and eighty new publications were established, which boasted a readership of twelve million Iranians.[67] Sohrab discussed this phenomenon:

> You could see the theory of democracy in the newspapers … And the first colored newspapers were published during the Khatami period. This was very important. Not that they were in color, this wasn't important, but when you make publications more attractive, all publishers are forced to change their format. This was the only time that I, myself, would read newspapers, like one or two newspapers everyday. Why? Because it wasn't just the daily news. In the middle of the newspaper there were articles about politics, arts and society. They're not daily articles, they had been written previously, like a day or two before. I read these articles with great eagerness because they were about very useful subjects, a complement to the daily news that is common among all newspapers. This is why I had a good feeling. I felt like some things were happening in the country.

Sohrab's statement illustrates the change that Khatami's liberalization of the media produced.

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[64] Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*, 187.
[65] Mohajerani was the Iranian Minister of Culture from 1997-2000.
[66] Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*, 187.
[67] Ibid., 190.

Newspapers were not the only thing that received a splash of color. After the 1979 Revolution, black became the unofficial color of the Islamic Republic. According to the authorities, black was the most somber color, and therefore the preferred color for clothing, particularly veiling. After over twenty years of a society marked by funereal garb, psychiatrists began to express concern about the alarming rate of depression in Iran, especially among Iranian women. In the summer of 2000, the Ministry of Education announced that elementary school girls would be permitted to wear more colorful uniforms, as a means to maintain the mental health of students, encourage a spirit of hopefulness and ultimately create a happier atmosphere for the future generation.[68]

Sohrab also commented on what Khatami's presidency indicated for the field of arts and culture, as opposed to how it was addressed in the news media. He stated:

> If you want to walk in the opposite direction of the Islamic Republic, your movements will be slow because they keep putting up barriers in your way … But Khatami did just that for the people, for a number of reasons. One was the debate over the freedom of books. He came and said that they wouldn't censor books [any longer], although a series of guidelines and principles had to be observed. It was even like this in the [art] galleries. Like in a gallery of paintings, for example, if you wanted to exhibit a series, you would take it there and say, "I want to showcase these fifty paintings or photographs." Before you could do this, the gallery owner had to take a picture of each one of the pieces and send them to the Islamic Guidance Administration. The Islamic Guidance Administration would then say that you could only exhibit these twenty [paintings/photographs] on the wall. Khatami came and got rid of all of this. He said that each person may use his own judgment. If you want to undertake the expense of publishing a book, and later, someone stands in your way, *you* sustain that loss. The producer takes the loss for having put down the money to print the book. He also told the gallery owners, "With your understanding of the Islamic Republic and the limitations that exist, you may choose what you like." And they weren't very rigid at all. I remember portraits of nudes. The gallery owners would put these portraits in another room, a private room, and would exhibit them there. What I'm saying is that there was some relative freedom.

[68] I first heard about this phenomenon from my Iranian grandmother back in 2000, when she was discussing the changes that had taken place since the election of Khatami, although Orkideh Behrouzan also discusses this in her book, *Prozak Diaries: Psychiatry Generational Memory in Iran*.

As an artist in the field, Sohrab's statement testifies not only to the welcomed effects of Khatami's policies on the arts community, but also the hope that it engendered within this demographic.

Khatami's election thus gave his proponents an unparalleled optimism and fortitude, inspired by the hope for change. Liberalization of the press and a relaxed censorship of the arts were among the manifestations of this change, which occurred immediately after Khatami's election to the presidency. However, the Reformist preoccupations with civil society and the press resulted in their neglect of the tedious, but also more important task of creating a grassroots infrastructure.[69] Khatami was even quoted saying, "Unfortunately it is not up to the government to establish parties; the people must do that themselves."[70] Another obvious shortcoming of the reform movement was a distinct neglect of the economic situation. Intellectual debates over the parameters of civil society were inconsequential to the average Iranian, who was far more concerned about the country's economic situation and had voted for the Reformist government with the hope that it would address this particular problem. The Reformists, however, failed to woo either the labor force or the middle class with their continued insistence on defining an Iranian civil society, thus limiting their national appeal.[71] The inability to build a sustainable base of support among those Iranians, who had been so instrumental in Khatami's first election, was ultimately the downfall of the Reformist movement.

The summer of 1999 witnessed the most significant blow to the Reform Movement and one of the greatest travesties in the history of the Islamic Republic. That summer, conservative members of the parliament adamantly worked to block Khatami's attempts to liberalize Iran's

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[69] Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*, 190.
[70] Ali Ansari, *Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2000), 141.
[71] Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*,196.

political and social systems. The Guardian Council vetoed the majority of Khatami's reform bills, under the pretext that they violated the sharia and the constitution. Meanwhile, the judiciary embarked upon the "great newspaper massacre" in which more than sixty publications were banned.[72] This was a significant blow because the Reformist Press was the hallmark of Khatami's presidency.

When the Reformist newspaper *Salam* was shut down on July 7, 1999, the students at the University of Tehran, representing a substantial portion of Khatami's voting contingency, responded by staging a demonstration. What began as a peaceful rally turned into a bloody massacre, when hundreds of riot police raided the university dormitory on July 8, 1999. That evening, approximately four hundred plainclothes paramilitaries cascaded on the university dorm. Student reports stated that the uniformed police stood idly by while the paramilitary forces kicked down doors, thrashed their batons through the halls, grabbed female students by their hair, set fire to the rooms and actually threw students out of the third story balcony. A number of students sustained broken bones from the fall, while one reportedly lay paralyzed on the ground. Hospital records also included admittance of students with bullet wounds, indicating the use of firearms. At least one student was killed in the attack on the university dorm.[73] The raid incited six days of rioting and protests throughout the country, during which three other people were killed and more than two hundred people were injured.[74] In the aftermath of the incidents, more than seventy students had disappeared, an estimated 1200-1400 people were

[72] Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 191.
[73] Shirin Ebadi, *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope* (New York: Random House, 2006), 149.
[74] "Six Days That Shook Iran," *BBC News*, July 11, 2011, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/828696.stm.

detained and the whereabouts and condition of five students still remain unknown according the Human Rights Watch.[75]

Instead of advocating on behalf of his support base, Khatami responded by issuing a statement that the actions of the students threatened the foundation of the Republic and urged the rioters to go home. He was the first to utilize the term *arāzel owbāsh*[76] in reference to the country's youth, specifically those who had incited the student protests. Ultimately, the University Dormitories Tragedy marked the beginning of the rift between Khatami and the Third Generation. It was after this point that slogans of "Death to despotism," "Freedom of thought, always, always!" and ultimately "Khatami must go" were heard in demonstrations for the first time.[77] Meanwhile, students who had turned to their champion with chants of "Khatami, where are you?" were confronted with a seemingly weak and incapable leader who urged them all to be tolerant and return to their homes.

Thus, Khatami's youthful supporters became disillusioned with the Reformist president for his excessive caution in the face of their most dire battle. Consequently the Third Generation lost faith in the power of the Reform Movement. Takeyh contends that these protests were a reflection of Third Generation hopes for an accountable and democratic government being squashed by the theocratic state.[78] Meanwhile, the cracks within the reform movement widened into chasms between those who called for patience in the implementation of reforms and those demanding more assertiveness from Khatami.

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[75] "New Arrests and 'Disappearances' of Iranian Students," Human Rights Watch, July 29, 1999, https://www.hrw.org/news/1999/07/29/new-arrests-and-disappearances-iranian-students.
[76] Riffraff
[77] Said Arjomand, "The Rise and Fall of President Khatami and the Reform Movement in Iran," *Constellations* 12, No. 4 (2005): 509.
[78] Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*, 192-193.

Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei further alienated the Third Generation by stating, "Legal violence is good. It is necessary," when asked about the violent repression of the student uprising.[79] Khatami's inability and unwillingness to stand up for his proponents characterized the remainder of his presidency. Each time Khatami deferred from condemning the shutdown of a Reformist newspaper, the suppression of a rally, the disruption of a political meeting, and the arrest of an activist under false charges, beyond simply expressing his condolences, he exposed the Reformists' impotence to initiate the change that they had promised to the Third Generation. Khatami's own passive demeanor, which advocated a gradual and evolutionary approach, only served to diminish his popularity among his youthful supporters, many of whom called for immediate action.

Essentially, the 1999 student riots initiated the divorce of the Third Generation from Khatami and his Reformist Movement. The University Dormitory Tragedy and its aftermath marked the point when the issue of young people became highly politicized in Iran, but it also served to demonstrate how the ideals of reform constituted a serious threat to the survival of the theocracy. It was for this reason that the right wing strongly urged and encouraged the quashing of the student protests and quickly mobilized to do whatever it could to emasculate and subvert the Khatami government.[80] The 2000 parliamentary election was thus critical for both reformist and conservative factions of the government. In this election, eighty-three percent of the eligible electorate participated in voting for 290 seats in the parliament. Reformers won approximately

[79] *Islamic Republic News Agency* (IRNA), May 12, 2000.
[80] Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*, 193.

three quarters of the total votes, with 170 seats.[81] At this point, however, the pervasive sense of disillusionment had already taken hold of the Third Generation.

Sepideh discussed the sense of disenchantment that her generation experienced after the student protests and Khatami's inability to protect his original constituents. She stated:

> During the Khatami era, they had made up this joke that Khatami is all talk, no action. Back then, his opposition would antagonize him because he wouldn't do anything; now we know that the Leader had a lot of power over him. The Leader wouldn't allow it. But the joke that they had made about him (Khatami) is that he's all talk. The people *were* hopeful, but the fact is that they didn't allow him to do anything.

Sepideh's statement is interesting because it suggests hindsight, that her generation's criticism of Khatami was not justified. Her blaming Khamenei in 2017 for Khatami's failures to meet her generation's hopeful expectations reifies the miasmic disillusionment suffered by the Third Generation during the Khatami era, but also suggests an exculpation of the Reformist president in light of his successor. It also demonstrates a realization of the faults extant in the *velāyat-e faqih* government, which undermined reform of the system.

In 2001, Khatami ran for a second term in the presidential election and won a so-called "hollow victory," against independent candidate Ahmad Tavakkoli. Khatami ran as the only moderate candidate, although with markedly less enthusiasm than his first campaign run. He was still able to win a landslide victory, getting over eighty percent of the vote, although thirty-three percent of the electorate did not participate (as opposed to the eighteen percent who did not vote in the previous presidential election). Despite a lower voter turnout, Khatami received 21.7 million votes, surpassing the twenty million votes that had won him the presidency in 1997.[82]

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[81] John P. Nordin, "Overwhelming Parliamentary Election Victory by Iran's Reformers a Major Step Toward Real Democracy," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, http://www.wrmea.org/2000-april/overwhelming-parliamentary-election-victory-by-iran-s-reformers-a-major-step-toward-real-democracy.html.
[82] Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*, 113.

The re-election of Khatami galvanized the Reform Movement to a degree, demonstrating that the vast majority of voting Iranians not only believed in the electoral system, but were still hopeful and optimistic with regard to reform. During his second term, Khatami pushed for constitutional amendments that sought to redefine the power of the various unelected institutions in the country, essentially striving to limit the potency of the Guardian Council. In 2003 he submitted two bills to the Majlis, which aimed to curtail the powers of the conservative hardliners by stripping the Guardian Council of its right to screen candidates for public office and to enable the president to challenge the judiciary. The bills also sought to assert the position of the president as the second most powerful state figure, after the supreme leader.[83] Yet ultimately, the bills were rebuffed and Khatami was forced to withdraw them.

Khatami's reformist policies did, however, inspire a crescendo of intellectual and artistic ingenuity. This was facilitated by the advent of the Internet into Iran. While Khatami's first presidential term witnessed the heyday of the press, it was during his second term that Internet-use among Iranians became a notable phenomenon. In 1996, a mere two thousand Iranians reported using the Internet. That number rose to approximately five thousand by the beginning of Khatami's first term. The following year, the number of Iranian Internet users had surged to 22,000, a 440% increase. By the year 2000, there were 130,000 reported Internet users in Iran, and by 2003 that number had exploded to over 1.3 million.[84] Widespread access to the Internet exposed Iran to the forces of globalization, essentially functioning to end the country's cultural isolation from the rest of the world. The reverberating effects of extensive access to the Internet initiated a sociocultural transformation of contemporary Iran. For this reason, the war over censorship of cultural expressions extended over into the realm of the World Wide Web.

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[83] Ehteshami and Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of its Neoconservatives*, 14.
[84] Ibid, 12.

Conservative forces were exceptionally concerned with the increased popularity of the Internet, particularly because they feared its use would lead to engagement with "enemies of the regime," and that it would serve as a medium through which the country's Islamic values could be jeopardized.[85] The Third Generation, however, pushed for continued access to the information highway. Hadi describes the effects he experienced from access to the Internet as an undergraduate student at IUT. He stated:

> I attended university during the Khatami era and I graduated during Ahmadinejad. The atmosphere was certainly freer, but I can't say what percentage of this open atmosphere was due to Khatami himself and his administration. I went (to school) during a time that was marked by the appearance of computers and the Internet and social media. Well [access to] this made society more open. You can't separate this fact from these things. Another factor is that I was going to high school until then and I was under the supervision of my family. But now I was at the university. My parents were in Tehran and I had come to Isfahan. I became independent and I was having new experiences. Each one of these factors categorically had an effect on my view of the atmosphere as being more open.

Despite an obvious attempt to remain impartial, Hadi's statement indicates how Khatami's policies functioned to open up Iranian society to the forces of globalization. This resulted in a loosening of the social strictures that had been imposed on Iranian society since the establishment of the Islamic state. Hadi's mention of the vital role that access to computers, the Internet and social media played in creating a more open society suggests that Khatami's policies, by facilitating access to the outside world, ultimately engendered a sociocultural shift, twenty years later. This renders Khatami's impact particularly significant, specifically considering the direction that Khamenei was leading the country before the onset of the Reform Movement.

In 1992, after the end of the decade-long "Holy Defense," Khamenei launched a campaign against "Western cultural invasion" (*tahājom-e farhangi-ye gharb*). This defense was

[85] Ibid.

to be applied to all aspects of Iranian society and was modeled after Khomeini's original crusade against the pervasive culture of the West. In that same year, Khatami resigned as the Minister of Culture, a post that he had retained for an entire decade and in which he had actually facilitated the "cultural opening" of the country. For this reason, many consider Khamenei's Defense Against Cultural Invasion a retaliatory measure. Early during Khatami's first term, the Supreme Leader had mentioned his concern for the country's youth several times, specifically regarding their inclination toward Western culture. He had expressly voiced the apprehension that the children of the revolution would develop a dependence on it—a dependence, which, if not broken, would eventually consume the Islamic State.[86] Khamenei lamented that the post-Revolution generation was too susceptible to the depravity of "MTV Culture," which they were exposed to via illegal satellite television, as well as a tendency to romanticize Pahlavi era Iran, based on their parents' recollection of the "Good old days" before the revolution. These two trends, he warned, would be the driving force behind the secularization of Iranian society.[87] Khatami's policies, however, allowed for these two trends to flourish, and released the proverbial floodgates, permitting an unprecedented exposure to the world, unfettered access to information and the emboldening of the youth to initiate the sociocultural shifts that would later become perceptible during the Ahmadinejad era and beyond.

What was particularly remarkable about Khatami's presidency with regard to the Third Generation is that it permitted this demographic to come to its own, so to speak. Despite their disenchantment, the Third Generation had become a force to be reckoned, as they demonstrated through their contribution in the election of Khatami, their involvement in the Reform movement, the 1999 student uprising and finally in their criticism of their failed champion.

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[86] Ehteshami and Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of its Neoconservatives*, 17.
[87] Ibid.

While there had been a significant Reformist presence in the various state institutions during Khatami's presidency, however, the conservative right wing had been able to maintain power through its control of the armed forces, the media, the judiciary and the economic organizations (*bonyāds*). The dynamism engendered by the Reform Movement reflected Iranian society's desire for change. Khatami, however, was unable to bring about the type of change that his constituents, specifically the Third Generation, had hoped for. Khatami's student supporters were disappointed by his unwillingness to come to their aid during the summer of 1999, and even more so by his public endorsement of the establishment against which they were rebelling, and as a result, slipped into a collective sociopolitical disillusionment. At the same time, lower and middle class Iranians, who had endured the greatest economic strain during Khatami's presidency, came to fore.

Ahmadinejad: The Villagers Strike Back

Throughout the 1990s and during Khatami's two presidential terms, the social milieu of the country was ripe for change. There was a nationwide feeling of innovative hope, as the clerical reformers sought to reconcile democracy with religion, while young Iranians began to distance themselves from the culture of martyrdom and spiritual devotion that had characterized the Islamic Republic from its establishment. There was a particular demographic, however, that did not share this hopeful sentiment so distinctive of the young Iranians who had placed their faith in Khatami and the Reform Movement. This demographic was the War Generation, which consisted of the pious men who had served on the frontlines of the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. The War Generation (or the Second Generation) was marked by as their revolutionary zeal and

commitment to Khomeini's original mission.[88] These reactionaries formed the core of the Iranian neoconservative movement, which essentially called for a return to the roots of the revolution. While Iran's political climate seemed to be shifting from government reform to economic development, it was actually a combination of the public's disenchantment with the political process and the neoconservatives' manipulative propagation that won them mass appeal.

The electorate was changing to reflect the apathy and disillusion felt by a substantial portion of Iranians. Middle and upper class voters from large urban areas simply did not participate in the 2005 presidential election with the same zeal and enthusiasm as they had in 1997 or even in 2001. In 2005, the Reformist camp threw their support behind Mostafa Moin and once again built a platform on the liberalization of the theocracy from within. Yet, after eight years of Khatami and no sustainable amelioration of society, their promises of reform fell on deaf ears. The majority of voters in the 2005 election were, therefore, not the optimistic youth or the moderate middle class, but rather those Iranians who were be wooed by the promise of relief from economic adversity.

As a presidential candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad presented himself as a humble public servant who ran on a platform of "put[ting] Iran's petroleum income on peoples' table."[89] In the run-off election with Rafsanjani, Ahmadinejad appeared to be a modest man devoted to Iran and Iranians; it was for this reason that he won the election with a victory of sixty-four percent of the vote.[90] Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was the Islamic Republic's first neoconservative candidate and president.

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[88] Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*, 223.
[89] Kasra Naji, *Ahmadinejad: The Secret History of Iran's Radical Leader* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2007), 68-72.
[90] Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*, 235.

Iran's neoconservatives are a largely non-clerical force dominated by security actors. They are ideologically Islamist, revolutionary in character and populist in their application of policy. Iranian neoconservatives view the cultural foundation upon which the Islamic Republic was established as the only remaining relic from the 1979 Islamic Revolution and are therefore dedicated to its preservation. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)/*Sepah* is the bedrock of the conservative movement's survival and resurgence. It has had increasing influence in Iran's foreign policy, strategy and economy since 1997, and has been awarded a growing degree of power by Khamenei. Even before the election of Ahmadinejad, for example, former *Sepah* commander, Ezatollah Zarghami, was named head of the IRIB[91] in 2004, a post that he maintained throughout Ahmadinejad's two presidential terms.[92]

In the 2000s, military officers began to dominate the entrepreneurial realm in Iran. The IRGC has become a multibillion-dollar empire, controlling over a third of Iran's economy.[93] Sohrab described how this phenomenon was linked to Ahmadinejad's presidency. He claimed that during this particular time period, the IRGC assumed control of thirty to forty percent of Iran's economy, through shares and companies in the oil industry, manufacturing industry, tech industry, etc. Sepideh alleged that the extent of the IRGC's reach into Iran's economy was not public knowledge. Sohrab explained:

> They have pretty names. Like Apadana. You wouldn't know. [Apadana] is a name from ancient times. They would choose pretty names that are chic, so that you couldn't guess. You would have to somehow know that it belonged to Sepah … Like there was this thing called the Padīdeh Company (Sherkat-e Padideh), that suddenly boomed. They called it Padīdeh-ye Shāndiz. It was a company in Mashhad. It started as a restaurant. Once I was in Kish and I went to the other side of the island and saw a great big luxury building that looked like a castle. I asked, "What's this?" They told me that this is the new Shāndīz Restaurant in Kish. Then, Ahmadinejad came and inaugurated the building at the ribbon-

[91] The national Iranian television and radio broadcasting system
[92] Ehteshami and Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of its Neoconservatives*, 83.
[93] Saeid Golkar, *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

> cutting ceremony. Like the president of the country came to inaugurate a chelo kebab restaurant! Like cut the ribbon! There must have been something in his interest, but like I said, they're clever.

Sohrab's statement not only suggests a degree of corruption characterizing the Ahmadinejad presidency (which will be further examined in the next chapter), but also conveys a general distrust of that administration.

Sepideh then described how the IRGC's economic reach affected her own family during the Ahmadinejad presidency. She recounted that her brother and his wife had both lost their jobs at MAPNA because the IRGC had bought the company and had replaced them with their own engineers. She stated, "[T]he people whom they didn't like, those who were not 'revolutionary' enough in their own words, they would dismiss them." Similar to her husband, Sepideh's speculative account indicates the deep level of distrust and resentment harbored by the Third Generation against Ahmadinejad. Sepideh and Sohrab's claim of the IRGC's heightened economic activity during Ahmadinejad's presidency is substantiated by the documented example of the Mobin Trust Company. In 2009, the Mobin Trust Company, which is another front for the IRGC, bought fifty-one percent of the shares of the Iran Telecommunications Company. After this transaction, state police launched a new unit dubbed the "Internet Police," which was specifically founded to surveil the online activities of Iranian citizens.[94]

Such claims are further bolstered by Ahmadinejad's employment history. During the early days of the Islamic Republic, he worked in the "internal security" department of the IRGC and gained a reputation for his "strong personality" and his interrogation skills. Later in the 1980s, he worked at Evin, the notorious detention center designated for political dissidents. Evin is the site of egregious human rights violations, where thousands of Iranian political prisoners

[94] Mohammad Hadi Sohrabi-Haghighat, "New Media and Social-Political Change in Post-Khomeini Iran," *CyberOrient* Vol. 5, Issue 1, http://www.cyberorient.net/article.do?articleId=6187, 2011.

have been detained, tortured and executed, even before the establishment of the Islamic Republic.[95] Ultimately, during his tenure with the IRGC, Ahmadinejad was promoted to the post of senior commander of the Elite Qods[96] Force.[97] Ahmadinejad's extensive experience with the Revolutionary Guard not only insured the president's backing of IRGC economic overtures, but also rendered him the neoconservative candidate of choice.

Ahmadinejad's political career began in 2003, when he was appointed mayor of Tehran by the city's municipal council. As mayor of Tehran, Ahmadinejad worked to reverse the progressive policies instituted by previous moderate and reformist mayors, and to emphasize the revolutionary ideals of religious piousness and martyrdom. He ordered the revamping of cultural centers into prayer halls and even suggested the re-internment of martyrs of the Iran-Iraq War throughout the major squares of the capital.[98] Fortunately this inane proposition did not receive enough support to be implemented.

Part of the reason that Ahmadinejad won the presidency in 2005 was due a general boycott of the elections by the voting bloc that had previously brought the Reformists to power. These voters collectively boycotted the election to protest the Reformists' inability to implement the individual and political freedoms that they had promised during their campaign. The urban youth remained unimpressed by Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the candidate backed by the Reformers, and refused to vote for him in the run-off election.[99] Vashti reflected on how the Third Generation, particularly university students, were disappointed with Khatami leading up to the 2005 election. This election was a run-off (two part) election, in which the Third Generation

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[95] For a thorough account of life in Evin as a political prisoner, see Iraj Mesdaqi's four-volume work, *Na Zistan, Na Marg* (*Not Living, Not Dying*), although the series has not been translated to English to my knowledge.
[96] Jerusalem
[97] Ehteshami and Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of its Neoconservatives*, 55.
[98] Ibid, 56.
[99] www.sharghnewspaper.com/850620/html/online.htm.20June2005

was divided in its support for Mostafa Moein and Hashemi Rafsanjani. Vashti claims that this was the mistake of the Reformers. They had too many candidates and not enough dissuasion, she said, while the conservatives were collectively united behind Ahmadinejad.

Ahmadinejad's simple lifestyle, humble background and emphasis on economic justice for the poor, garnered him a solid support base that had not been previously mobilized. He ran on a platform of Islamic morality, social justice, fairness, integrity and modesty; values, which he claimed were in accordance with the core principles of the Islamic Revolution.[100] Vashti described how her university cohort was dismissive of the possibility of an Ahmadinejad presidency, simply based on his attire; she noted that her generation seemed to be more concerned with his physical appearance than with his credentials and qualifications. Ultimately it was the social contingencies that felt adversely affected by the reformist policies of Khatami that mobilized to elect Ahmadinejad in 2005. Sohrab suggested this while commenting on Ahmadinejad's appearance as well. He stated:

> In the election (of Ahmadinejad), I remember one of the things that they would always say to the people: that because he has such an indigent appearance, he is *of* the people. That he's not looking to fill his pockets, or that he hasn't sewn bags for the people around him to increase their wealth. Therefore, many people from the lower classes really trusted him and voted for him.

The difference between the two descriptions again exemplifies how prominent class is within Iran's sociocultural context. Vashti describes how urban, middle-class, Millenial Iranians looked down on Ahmadinejad based on his *dehati* appearance, which they thought rendered him unqualified. Sohrab, on the other hand, described how Ahmadinejad's appearance appealed to the lower classes, that related to the candidate based on his mannerisms and attire. This demographic of traditionalist, urban masses, was driven by a fear of Khatami's reforms. They believed that Khatami had attempted to coopt the regime and place power in the hands of the

[100] 32 *Sharq*, June 20, 2005; *Aftab-e Yazd*, June 21, 2005.

liberal, intellectual and secular elements of society, and thus voiced their support for Ahmadinejad and the neoconservative movement accordingly.

While Khatami's youthful supporters had been primarily intellectuals, academics, and generally characterized as "moderates," Ahmadinejad's followers were more traditional, religious and oriented toward preserving the ideals of the Islamic Revolution. Emad Afroogh, the Head of the Majlis Commission for Cultural Affairs morosely referred to the formation of Ahmadinejad's administration as the death of intellectualism in Iran.[101] Essentially this was an era during which the intellectual elite began to dwindle and disappear. Conservatives touted the ideal of the intellectual as a westoxified moral degenerate, thus creating a chasm between the liberal moderates and the *mostazafin*[102]. Neoconservatives perpetuated the claim that the issue of civil society, democracy, economic reform, women's rights and human rights (which were the primary concern of the Reformists) were inconsequential to the downtrodden. The *mostazafin*, they asserted, would be better served by a government promising social justice and economic development; in this scheme, intellectuals advocating for Western civil society would become obsolete.[103]

The "Death of Intellectualism" signaled an era in which respect for basic human rights, especially freedom of expression and assembly, diminished drastically, while more and more newspapers became banned. The educated members of the middle and upper classes, and especially the intelligentsia, felt a sense of regression. Sohrab stated, "In all fields, whether political, artistic, social or economic, everything changed. As we said, everything collapsed." He explained why he felt so disillusioned:

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[101] www.isna.ir, April 29, 2006.
[102] Poor and downtrodden
[103] Ehteshami and Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of its Neoconservatives*, 90.

> For us, who are educated and could distinguish between good and bad, this, in particular, created [a sense of] hopelessness among us. We would read and see that the guy was talking nonsense. Especially with regard to the arts. Khatami was someone who really cared about culture. He had, at some point, been the Cultural and Islamic guidance minister, and many people were satisfied with him. Many, as in those of us who were in the arts, were happy even when he was Minister [of Culture]. Naturally someone whose primary concern is culture during the time of his ministry, will continue this policy when he becomes president. He won't just put it aside. Ahmadinejad, as we say, didn't know two cents worth of culture. He wouldn't even talk about it; everything had become the economy. That they want to do this or that for the poor. And he also had the fortune of the sanctions really destroying the economy; but this was due to his own imprudence and tactless lack of planning. The sanctions caused Iran's economy to worsen day by day … but Ahmadinejad's weaknesses was the debate around culture. Like he didn't have any cultural programs. None. If you go search his record in the presidential archive to see what programs and dictates he made about the arts, there is nothing. My problem with Ahmadinejad supporters was just that—if you don't tend to culture, then the economy and the politics will not be fixed either. For this reason, Khatami's positive point was that he wanted to "change" people culturally.

Sohrab's statement demonstrates how the two candidates were the champions of two rather diverse demographics. Khatami was perceived to want to initiate cultural change and therefore appealed to those sectors of society who were in favor of such a shift. Ahmadinejad, on the other hand, curried favor with the *mostazafin* through demagoguery. For an artist like Sohrab, the difference between the two administrations was vast, as the respective policies on art and culture directly affected him.

While Khatami's 1997 and 2001 presidential victories reflected Iranian voters' desire for reform and international integration, Ahmadinejad's win in 2005 demonstrated a shift in concern for social and economic justice. Although, as Vashti stated, many previous supporters of the Reform Movement did not participate in this election or vote for Ahmadinejad in order to spite Rafsanjani. Regardless, Ahmadinejad's presidency ushered in an era marked by populist revolutionary rhetoric, messianism, censorship, political isolation, economic instability and a mass exodus of the brightest and most educated young Iranians.

In terms of economic policy, the Iranian Neoconservatives were not much different from the Reformists or the traditional conservatives. All three groups were essentially free marketers with deep ties to Iran's commercial centers of power. What specifically characterized the Neoconservatives was their staunch commitment to maintaining the religious and cultural values of the Islamic state. The Islamic Republic is incumbent upon maintaining the memory of the 1979 Revolution. As the cultural fundamentals of the Islamic State are the only remnants of the Revolution that can be kept alive, they are vehemently protected by advocates of the regime.[104] The Neoconservative Movement distinguished itself from traditional conservatism by touting a reformist-inspired political agenda that emphasized a need for reform and uprooting corruption. However, by prioritizing economic justice, the Neoconservatives were able to appeal to the demographic disillusioned by the failure of the Second of Khordad Movement, as well as the traditional right, which remained unimpressed by the Reformists' inability to initiate progress within realm of civil society and secular rights.[105] The Neoconservatives, thus, presented themselves as the new alternative to the impotent Reform Movement, and ultimately facilitated the victory of Ahmadinejad in 2005 and arguably in 2009.

The 2009 Election and The Green Movement

The 2009 presidential election had been the most widely participated-in presidential election since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Much of the Millenial Generation rallied behind the two moderate candidates: Mehdi Karroubi and Mirhossein Mousavi. Mostafa claimed that most of the students that attended Sharif University, the

[104] Ehteshami and Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of its Neoconservatives*, 18.
[105] Ibid., 41.

University of Tehran and Amir Kabir were Karroubi supporters.[106] He alleged that this was due to Karroubi's associates, who were prominent figures of the Reform Movement (such as Karbaschi) and that this had a greater appeal to university students than did Mousavi's entourage. According to Mostafa, this was specifically because Karroubi talked about citizens' and students' rights at a time when no other candidate mentioned the matter. Among the students of Amir Kabir, Karroubi was deemed the most articulate and eloquent candidate, he said, which served as another factor contributing to his popularity among university students.

Other Millenial Iranians voted for Mousavi. Vashti described how she was certain that Mousavi would win based on the massive presence of his proponents in the public sphere. She asserted that the streets (of Isfahan) were devoid of Ahmadinejad supporters, stating:

> We were certain he (Mousavi) would win. My sisters and I would go out into the streets and honk our horn. You couldn't see *one* Ahmadinejad supporter. They were out there, but they were few and far in between. And they wouldn't come out.

However, on June 13, 2009, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared the winner of the 2009 Iranian presidential election, merely one day after the election took place. Vashti described the consternation that she felt when she heard the news:

> In the beginning we were in shock. Then, the people went out into the streets the next day to protest. But I understand perfectly; they were angry. Because we had all believed that we had won. Now I don't know how much of it was fraud, or how much of it was our own limited perspective that everyone around us had. Like in our department we only knew two people [who were Ahmadinejad supporters]. All of our professors were Mousavi supporters. All of the students were Mousavi supporters. So we thought, "That's it! Everyone is voting for Mousavi."

Vashti's comment is interesting because it recalls some of the analysis that came out of the 2016 American presidential election—particularly with regard to Facebook. After the election of Donald Trump and the overwhelming display of disbelief from the liberal left, several articles came out revealing how Facebook specifically caters to our political views and abets a false

[106] These are the top three universities in Iran.

sense of security about the actual political climate of the country. Social media, particularly Facebook, however, was not as prevalent in Iran before the 2009 election. It was this election, in fact, that led to a full-fledged embrace of social media by the Third Generation. Vashti's commentary indirectly questions the significance afforded to social media in its ability to affect political outcomes, although this is not to say that social media did not play an important role in the mobilization of the Green Movement.

In light of the highly dissatisfied demographic of young voters who specifically participated in this election to ensure a one-term presidency for Ahmadinejad, the conservative hardliner's supposed landslide victory was cause for contention. A substantial number of Iranians alleged that the election was fraudulent, a claim that ultimately inspired the 2009 Green Movement. While the Green Wave initially began as a protest against Ahmadinejad's declared re-election over his widely popular political contender, Mirhossein Mousavi, the uprising quickly transformed into a social movement, in which Iranians expressed dissatisfaction with the status quo and voiced a desire for change, particularly regarding their civil rights and liberties. In retrospect, however, many of those same Millenial Iranians who had been active in the uprising, admit that Ahmadinejad had a more powerful base than they had thought, as Vashti did. Hadi was one such person, as he stated:

> I would have interactions with people who were close to me; they would say things in agreement with Ahmadinejad and for me it was shocking; like how was it even possible for such an idea to exist? But now, when I look back, I can see my own blind spot. Like, my maternal grandmother is an old lady who lives in the village. She voted for Khatami; like I wrote in her ballot for her. She was never political. But when Ahmadinejad was running, my grandmother, who is an eighty-year old woman, said she would *only* vote for Ahmadinejad, even in '88.

Perhaps Hadi had been swayed by the rumors claiming that the Green Movement protests were isolated incidents and were primarily the antics of upper-class Tehrani youth. However,

countrywide acts of protests organized and disseminated through social media, would indicate otherwise. On July 21, 2009, the government shut down mobile networks, anticipating a protest in commemoration of 30 Tir (July 21, 1952).[107] As Time magazine reported, "Protests appear to be taking other forms apart from street actions; on Tuesday, for example, thousands of disgruntled Tehranis tried to bring down the electrical grid at 9 p.m. by simultaneously turning on household appliances, like irons, water heaters, and toasters."[108] Essentially, this was a collective action in which Iranians simultaneously used high-voltage appliances to create a blackout. There were reports of blackouts in Tehran, Karaj and Qazvin.[109] There was also the "plug-in" campaign, organized to short-circuit Ahmadinejad's first post-election television appearance, the campaign to falsely report protest locations to the police, the lights-on in cars campaign[110], the flash mobs that took place on Jāde-ye Chālūs[111] and the "Green Skies" campaign, in which Iranians released green balloons touting photographs of those who had died in the Green Movement protests.[112] These acts of protest, demonstrating opposition against Ahmadinejad, were primarily undertaken by tech-savvy Millenial Iranians.

Despite the prevalent allegations of fraud among his peers, Hadi was adamant that Ahmadinejad had won because he had been effective during his first term, claiming that the

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[107] On this date (July 21, 1952), Iranians protested the Shah's appointment of Qavam Saltaneh over nationalist hero, Mohammad Mossadegh, as Prime Minister of the country through large public demonstrations.
[108] "Amid Crackdown, Iranians Try a Shocking Protest," *Time*, July 22, 2009, accessed September 18, 2017, http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1912112,00.html.
[109] Robert Mackey, "July 20: Updates on the Protests in Iran," *The Lede: Blogging the News with Robert Mackey* in *The New York Times*, July 21, 2009, https://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/07/21/latest-updates-on-the-protests-in-iran/?mcubz=0.
[110] Persiankiwi, Twitter post, June 23, 2009, 3:06 a.m., Accessed September 18, 2017, https://twitter.com/persiankiwi/status/2292737838. And, "Shiraz, Iran, June 21, 2009 Car Protesters," YouTube, June 22, 2009, Accessed September 18, 2017, http://bit.ly/1buGXHP.
[111] The famous road which leads to the Caspian Sea; "Iran in August 01 2009—[Chalous Rd] Parts 1-4," YouTube, August 1, 2009, Accessed September 18, 2017, http://bit.ly/1QxDh8B and http://bit.ly/1zba8Lo and http://bit.ly/1J1OGsb.
[112] "Green Movement Balloon," YouTube, June 26, 2009, Accessed September 18, 2017, http://bit.ly/1PIcHbD. "[Green Balloons with Images of Our Beloved Departed]," YouTube, June 23, 2010, accessed September 18, 2017, http://bit.ly/1E9PWby. "July 4: Bring out the balloons," Standing With Free Iran, July 2, 2009, accessed September 18, 2017, http://bit.ly/1JtPCsA.

president had actually taken money to the villages and small towns, as he had promised to do. Hadi admitted that he was not a member of that social sector, but that his grandmother was, and she was happy with the attention that her village had received during Ahmadinejad's first term.

Even supporters of the Green Movement were aware of Ahmadinejad's appeal. Sepideh, who had been a proponent of Mousavi at that time, discussed how money was directly utilized to sway the election results, using her family as an example. She recounted how her uncle and his wife were staunch supporters of Ahmadinejad, specifically because they had received 600,000 tomans as a subsidy from his re-election campaign. They had used that money to pay an overdue bill, and had then voted for Ahmadinejad. Sepideh recalled that after the election, the campaign had taken the money back, claiming a banking error. Sohrab also contended that they (Ahmadinejad's campaign) had "bought the people" by giving out 500,000 tomans to each household. He claimed that Ahmadinejad had done this in many villages and it was for this reason that he was able to win the election. He stated:

> The people in Tehran all thought that their votes had been stolen. "How could Mousavi not get votes?" they asked, even though Ahmadinejad had gone to all of the villages and bought their votes. Some people even said that the uprisings were meaningless, because his unpopularity wasn't to the extent to think that Ahmadinejad couldn't get any votes. He *had* gotten them. Of course there was some fraud, but not to the extent that they replaced the votes.

Hannah also mentioned how Ahmadinejad was able to use money to win votes outside of Tehran, but she believed that the handouts were not enough to entice Tehranis to vote for him. She stated:

> Tehranis mostly voted for Mousavi or Karroubi. Like Ahmadinejad went up and said that he will give a forty-five thousand-toman subsidy. When you say that in Tehran, they'll laugh in your face and say that forty-five thousand is barely enough to pay for a dinner out. But when you go to the provinces, where there are no expenses because everything is so cheap, that forty-five thousand toman sounds like quite a lot of money.

Mostafa disagreed that Tehran was united behind the moderate candidates. He asserted that the suburbs of Tehran were, in fact, primarily proponents of Ahmadinejad, even among Millenial Iranians. He stated:

> You shouldn't just say Tehran. Tehran is also Karaj and Sāve. Even the youth. A lot of my friends voted for Ahmadinejad. Many of them voted based on belief, because they said Ahmadinejad was a simple man. There were a series of people who voted for Ahmadinejad to spite the state. I know some.

Mostafa's statement echoes what Vashti had said regarding the 2005 election, that some people voted for Ahmadinejad out of spite. Overall, the general consensus seems to be that Ahmadinejad was able to buy his re-election, either through the money that he had invested in the villages and small towns during his previous term, or the subsidies and handouts that his campaign had offered his supporters to ensure his re-election.

My informants were all aware of the appeal that Ahmadinejad had among certain sectors of society and that his victory was due to their voting power. In 2017, their frustrations seemed more directed at this voting contingency than the state. This is an important factor to note when thinking about the culture of Millenial Iranians, although the state was the primary target in the 2009 uprisings that followed the election.

The Green Movement and the Birth of Citizen Journalism

In the days that followed the election, Iranian activists organized protests using Twitter to announce the time and place of gatherings. The heavy restrictions on the freedom of press within the Islamic Republic and a series of glitches and missteps hindered journalists from reporting on the crisis and provided the opportunity for the phenomenon of citizen journalism to

arise.[113] Citizen journalism is defined as a wide-range of web-based applications in which everyday social media users engage in journalistic practices. The hashtag #CNNfail, along with #iranelection, for example, was used by Twitter subscribers to call attention to CNN's failure in reporting the 2009 summer uprising in Iran.[114] In lieu of reporting the Green Movement, CNN circulated the same stories about a grandmother in Nevada running a meth lab, the complaints that had arisen regarding the phasing out of analog television, and the bankruptcy of Six Flags amusement park.[115] CNN's failure to report a revolt in a country of major consequence to American foreign policy compelled people to take matters into their own hands and compensate for the neglect they received from major western news media outlets. The trend began when Iranian police confiscated ABC News Correspondent Jim Sciutto's camera and some of his footage. Scuitto used his cell phone to film the Green Movement protests, as well as the violent state response, and posted the films onto Twitter.[116]

Within a week of the uprising, hundreds of amateur videos were filmed by protestors and bystanders on their mobile devices and uploaded onto Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. The 2009 Green Movement was essentially the first populist revolt to utilize social media on a global scale. One particular video suddenly brought the worldwide spotlight onto Iran; on June 20, 2009, a video was uploaded onto YouTube that depicted the graphic death of Neda Agha Soltan. While the summer of 2009 witnessed at least four thousand detentions and 110 civilian casualties due to the Iranian state's crackdown, Neda Agha Soltan's death stands out because it was one that was actually captured on film and uploaded onto YouTube; her death was probably "the

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[113] I first encountered the term "citizen-journalist" (*sharvand khabarnegār*) during my interviews; a number of my informants mentioned the term while discussing the Green Movement. Negar Mottahedeh theorized the concept in her book *#iranelection: Hashtag Solidarity and the Transformation of Online Life*, which I read after conducting my interviews, thus reiterating the information that I had gathered.
[114] Mottahedeh, *#iranelection,* 9.
[115] Ibid., 9.
[116] Ibid.

most widely witnessed death in human history."[117] While standing in the street with her music teacher, the twenty-six year old Neda Agha Soltan was shot in her chest. This resulted in a very quick but graphic death. The video reveals the fallen young woman bleeding out of her eyes, nose and mouth, blood oozing over her entire face before she stopped breathing and died on camera. This perturbingly graphic video went viral, to such an extent that even American president, Barack Obama, saw it and expressed grief over the young life that was lost.[118] The fact that Neda Agha Soltan died at the age of twenty-six resonated with the Iranian Third Generation; she became a martyr for this generation of Iranians, who viewed her death as a representation of their plight, particularly in light of the state's response to the uprising.

While citizen journalism via viral videos can provide visibility, it is actually the legal media that provide "the larger narrative with ideological investments."[119] Mehdi Semati and Robert Allen Brookey claim that the Iranian case is instructive in that it presents an experience that combines an autocratic regime with a robust digital media environment. They assert that because the Iranian state has a monopoly on broadcasting, cell phones and blogs provide Iranians with alternative forums of expressions.[120] Digital media, then, presents Iranians with a medium through which to contest and criticize the media hegemony of the government, specifically through the circulation of images, songs, jokes and poems via texting sources. Despite the fact that Neda Agha Soltan's death validated the power of citizen journalism by bringing worldwide attention to the tragedy, Semati and Brookey claim that it was the traditional media that provided

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[117] Krista Mahr, "The Top 10 Everything of 2009," *Time*, December 8, 2009, Accessed September 18, 2017, http://ti.me/13YcywV.
[118] Muhammad Sahimi, "Martyrs of the Green Movement," *Frontline: Tehran Bureau*, June 19, 2010, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/06/martyrs-of-the-green-movement.html.
[119] Mehdi Semati and Robert Alan Brookey, "Not for Neda: Digitial Media (Citizen) Journalism and the Invention of a Post-Feminist Martyr," *Communication, Culture and Critique 7* (2014): 138.
[120] Ibid.

the narrative that contextualized her story and thus propagated the hegemonic discourse of the ruling elites.[121]

Conclusion: A Fraudulent Election?

In hindsight many of the participants of the Green Movement now assert that the election was not fraudulent, at least not to the extent that Mousavi had actually won. All of my informants agreed that Ahmadinejad had a stronger support base than what they had previously anticipated. Mostafa was very vehement about this, stating:

> There was no fraud. Do not make this mistake. Because during the election of '88, you had to look at the other cities, not just Tehran. The second time around the people came out again. Our problem was that the people who were participating in the Green Movement would look at the people around them. Iran isn't the people around you. You have to go to provinces. My friends were from the provinces. All of them said that their families voted for Ahmadinejad. I'm not saying that Ahmadinejad won categorically—it should have been a two-round election. But Ahmadinejad's vote was higher than the others. The state just wanted to end the elections, so Ahmadinejad was brought up. The state didn't want to take any risks.

Sohrab also reiterated that the 2009 election was not completely fraudulent, but rather was "engineered." In Iranian elections, each candidate has a representative present at the ballot box on Election Day. Sohrab mentioned how during the 2009 election, he had heard that some of Mousavi's representatives were either not issued their I.D. cards (which they were required to have in order to perform their representative duties), or that they were not issued their cards on time, and were therefore unable to observe at the voting stations. Sepideh added that this "election engineering" also involved voter suppression. She recalled how she had to go to three different voting stations before finding one that had ballots. Sohrab explained, "They would 'run out' in places where they knew Mousavi would get more votes, like in the north of the city for

[121] Ibid., 139.

example. This was the fraud." Vashti reiterated this point, emphasizing that *violations* took place rather than outright fraud. She asserted:

> Fraud, as in they changed the result of the election completely? I've come to the conclusion that in '88 it was not like this. They did not put Ahmadinejad in place of Mousavi. There was fraud in that they made [the number of] Ahmadinejad's votes higher, to prove that he was the most popular candidate and to ensure a powerful government. And at the very most, so that it wouldn't lead to a run-off election. Fraud to this extent … but I'm almost certain that it wasn't like Mousavi won and Ahmadinejad lost and that they just switched the two. But there were so many violations and there was so much more entrenchment (*jebhe gīrī*) from Voice and Vision, and from the Guardian Council that should have supervised the election … and from the Leader, he shouldn't have said anything … there was so much of that, that the people had a right to protest. And these protests became so widespread that a couple million people were out in the streets. And they (the state) brutally suppressed it. Well, what I want to say is that they had the right to protest, but if you ask me, they (the state) did not outright change the election results.

Whether these supposed violations resulted in a fraudulent outcome in the 2009 Iranian presidential election is up for debate. What is certain, however, is that the Green Movement was the historical climax for Millenial Iranians, as it was a social movement bred, fostered and carried out by this generation. The Green Movement was a manifestation of the prolific expansion of social media among Iranian youth, the rage that this demographic felt regarding the suppression of the few civil liberties and individual freedoms that they had gained during the Khatami era and a new form of political organization. It represented the intersection of the Post-Network, Post-Reform era, characterized by a particular relationship between the Millenial Generation and media, which will be further examined in the following chapter.

The Post-Network, Post-Reform Era: The Ahmadinejad Years

Television is both a mode of technology and a tool for cultural storytelling. From its inception and throughout the second half of the twentieth century, television has maintained its role as the purveyor of mass media and creator of culture. Beginning in the twenty-first century, however, television has become an increasingly delineate and individualized experience. In *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, Amanda Lotz describes this as a consequence of the emergence of the Post-Network era. She observes that the expansion of new convenience technologies and distribution methods have liberated viewers, providing them with greater control over their entertainment experience. However, freedom from the dictates of network television has fostered a growing reliance on a range of devices that demand an increasing amount of attention and financial resources.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, adroitness with mobile Internet technology is a prominent characteristic of Iran's Millenial Generation. Lotz observes that the penetration of convenience technologies accounts for one of the most distinct shifts between 2005 and 2013, a period which coincided with Ahmadinejad's two-term presidency. I contend that the changes in media distribution trends, along with the resulting expectations of convenience and mobility, have significantly impacted the formation of Iranian youth culture and identity, rendering the Ahmadinejad era a unique and critical time period.

The distribution of Mehran Modiri's *Shūkhī Kardam* is one example of the new post-network methods. In this chapter, I use this show as a text to examine the more prominent anxieties and tensions extant during the Ahmadinejad period. I contend that the show's method of distribution allowed for a less timid and therefore more accurate critique of Iranian society. I

conclude that the issues broached on the show point to the underlying reasons for the pervasive sense of disillusionment that defined Millenial Iranians during the Ahmadinejad era.

Iran and the Post-Network Era

Mehran Modiri is the most prolific and famous comedian in contemporary Iran. He is one of the first television celebrities of the Islamic Republic and is credited for reintroducing comedy as an accepted phenomenon in post-Revolution Iranian television. Modiri made his television comedy directorial debut in 1993 with *Parvāz-e 57* (Flight 57), but it was his 2002 *Pāvarchin* (Tiptoes) that propelled him to his status as the country's premier comedian. Modiri has successfully maintained this position by directing, producing and acting in comedy shows for over twenty years. In 2009, *Newsweek* magazine named him the twentieth most powerful person in Iran. This list was headed by supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei and indicated the degree of Modiri's clout and significance in contemporary Iranian public discourse. The social satirist has not only survived, but has thrived in Iran's entertainment business; his television comedies rule Iran's airwaves, "with audiences so big that broadcast executives don't balk at his lampoons of Iranian life."[122] In March of 2014, Modiri released *Shūkhī Kardam*. Unlike his previous comedy series that followed a storyline, *Shūkhī Kardam* is an itemized show. It consists of twenty-four episodes, focusing on eleven subjects (lying, marriage, violence, addiction, economy, health, Nowruz,[123] fashion, revenge, criticism and literacy). Each subject matter is examined in two episodes, through a variety of comedy sketches, with the last two episodes dedicated to the show's finale.

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[122] Newsweek Staff, "The 20 Most Powerful People in Iran," *Newsweek*, May 22, 2009, www.newsweek.com/20-most-powerful-people-iran-80061.
[123] The Persian New Year.

One particular *Shūkhī Kardam* sketch delineates perfectly the reason for the program's popularity, while justifying its method of distribution. In this sketch, three state television representatives are depicted trying to put together the Nowruz broadcast schedule. Their hackneyed program mocks IRIB's limited ability to entertain the public. For the Nowruz countdown, the representatives decide that one channel will air a variety show featuring celebrity guests (despite the fact that the only celebrity available is Behnoush Bakhtiari[124]), one station will broadcast from Behesht-e Zahra cemetery, "so that the memory of martyrs can be reawakened within the public mind," and the rest of the channels will broadcast news of the Sudanese massacre. For the thirteen days of Nowruz, the programing team states that they can chose from a grand total of five comedy series, 47-48 game shows, approximately one hundred public reports and 240 foreign cinematic films. They also discuss not being able to find anything from Iranian cinema suitable to screen and thus must resort to broadcasting the comedy film *Ekhrājīhā* thirteen times, with an encore each day, making for a total of twenty-six screenings. Desperate for more material, the director asks whether they can air the *Scrooge* cartoon, but his aid advises against this, stating that the *Scrooge* cartoon is more appropriate for the Christmas season. The director then ends the meeting by congratulating his team for coming up with an "exciting and joy-inducing" Nowruz television program schedule for the IRIB channels and offers his employees bananas.[125]

This sketch ridicules the programming, or rather lack of programming, offered by Iranian state television. It mocks IRIB and criticizes it for being boring and repetitive. The sketch comments on the limitations of the programming offered by Iranian state television; it disparages IRIB for its monotony and irrelevance, particularly during the Nowruz season. This is

[124] Behnoush Bakhtiari is a comedic actress who is known for always playing roles that are considered *loos* (spoiled) by Iranians, and is therefore not a favorite of the people.
[125] Modiri, "Nowruz," Episode 11, *Shūkhī Kardam*.

significant because *Shūkhī Kardam* was not aired on IRIB, but was instead distributed through the Iranian Home Entertainment Network on DVDs.

The direct sale of full seasons of shows on DVDs initiated the evolution of media distribution trends. By 2010, new technologies had rendered television deliverable through the Internet. In the United States, DVD sales were quickly overshadowed by Video on Demand (VOD), followed by broadband delivered streaming services, the latter of which functioned to dismantle the cultural power of networks as the gate keepers and agenda setters of mass media. As Internet deliverable television was not yet an option during the Ahmadinejad period, DVD distribution was as the primary method through which Iranians were able to watch programming independent of state television.[126] At that time, IRIB programming was considered trite, repetitive and boring, and therefore a subject worthy of ridicule. The above sketch demonstrates why DVD distributed programs, such as Modiri's *Shūkhī Kardam*, enjoyed such popularity and success.

Iranian audiences of IRIB and satellite television watch what Lotz has defined as *linear content*. *Linear content* is what people watch when they watch "what is on." The motivation for linear viewing is not necessarily watching for particular content, but rather a desire for companionship, distraction or entertainment.[127] Twentieth century broadcasting normalized linear content flow, as networks determined the times during which specific content would be

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[126] According to my informants, VOD services are still not yet available in Iran. There are, however, satellite channels that air one movie back to back for a number of days, with each channel timetabled to start the movie within half an hour of the others. For example, six channels will air the same movie repeatedly for ten days. There are also various Internet sites that provide online streaming (although Netflix is not available in Iran), but due to slower Internet speeds, Iranians still tend to use torrents, through which they download a particular show or movie. My informants report that with 4G Internet (which is not very prevalent in Iran due to its high cost), a movie will take approximately four hours to download, but without 4G it will take closer to twelve hours. In Iran, Internet service is cheaper during the evening hours, with some providers even offering free service from two a.m. to seven a.m. For this reason, Third Generation Iranians seeking prized content will arrange their download schedules to take place overnight and later watch what they have downloaded at their own convenience.

[127] Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 11.

aired. *Prized content*, on the other hand, refers to programing that people specifically seek out. The Post-Network era in television, as proposed by Lotz, is defined by the shift to nonlinear viewing of prized content. Specifically, the generation that has been acculturated with a range of communication technologies from a young age facilitated the transition to the Post-Network Era. Thus, generational differences are a significant component in this shift, as an understanding of television defined by binaries such as cable and broadcast, or television and computer, are inconsequential to those born before 1980.[128]

Lotz's argument may be applied to Iran's Third Generation, who by definition were born after 1980, and exhibit a technological fluency that differentiates them from previous generations. Upon the introduction of smartphones to the country, young Iranians were quick to adapt the devices into their everyday lives, and have since become accustomed to using multiple technologies to access information, find entertainment and communicate with one another. This "media agnosticism," as Lotz describes it, not only characterizes Millenial Iranians during the Ahmadinejad period, but also positions this demographic as the impetus for societal change.

Lying Media

The declaration of Ahmadinejad's presidential victory in June 2009 provoked the presence of hundreds of thousands of protestors in the streets of Tehran and other major Iranian cities. State radio and television not only refused to report the social movement, but also ran sitcoms and miniseries as means of distracting an already agitated public. IRIB's unwillingness to report the discrepancies in the election results and the massive protest movement that was taking place, gave rise to the phenomenon of citizen journalism (discussed in the previous chapter) as non-press related Iranians tweeted and uploaded videos, images and statuses of the

[128] Ibid., 30.

uprising onto social media platforms. On June 18, 2009, one of the most prolific and reliable Twitter sources reporting the uprising, @persiankiwi, tweeted the following at Iranian state media:

> IRIB.ir - How is it possible that 2million people march in your country and you say NOTHING? #iranelection 3:48 AM – 18 Jun 2009

Several days later, in one of the Green Movement demonstrations, a protestor marched toward the IRIB building holding an actual television box over his head. Amidst the signs of "Where is my vote?" the television box stood out, with the slogan "Lying Media" printed on both sides of the carton.[129] This demonstration prop and @persiankiwi's tweet both convey one of the most prevalent sentiments among the protesting public. It was for this reason that Mehran Modiri's *Shūkhī Kardam* was particularly popular among Iranians, for it tapped into a nerve that had been exposed four years prior.

Each episode of *Shūkhī Kardam* includes a satirical news segment that ridicules the lies that are propagated by the government-run news broadcast media. In the first newscast sketch of the series, the anchorman, who is played by Modiri himself, reports a number of satirical stories that present the exact opposite situation of the country during the Ahmadinejad period.[130] For example, Modiri reports that the government council has declared a National Air Pollution Day and has requested that citizens participate in polluting the air by taking out and driving their personal vehicles. He then states that Tehran has the cleanest air in the world, after the (fictional) deserted island of Booty Marmareh and continues that scientists believe extended

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[129] "Translation of Iran Slogans and Signs-2." *CNN iRepo*rt. June 24, 2009. Accessed September 9, 2017. http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-281703. And, "Translation of Iran Slogans and Signs." CNN iReport. June 22, 2009. Accessed September 9, 2017. http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-279025.

[130] Mehran Modiri, "Khalāghīat," *Shūkhī Kardam*, 2013, http://www.iranproud.net/series/Shookhi-kardam/episodes/khalaghiat-(dorogh).

exposure to excessive amounts of clean air and a lack of natural salts (such as lead and sulfur) will result in difficult to treat health problems.

In actuality, Iran's pollution problem is a decades-old issue, and has steadily increased in recent years, claiming lives and damaging healthy lungs. According to a Mehr News report, on average, one person dies every two hours of pollution-related causes in Tehran.[131] The latest statistics from the World Health Organization (WHO) report that four out of the ten most-polluted cities of the world are in Iran, with Ahwaz, in southern Iran, topping the list. Tehran was ranked 82nd out of 1,099 world cities evaluated for air pollution, a situation that many pollution experts say has worsened since the publication of the WHO report in early 2015.[132]

This news segment also takes a punch at the Islamic Republic's foreign policy. When anchorwoman Bonavid, played by Elika Abdolrazaghi, presents the international news, she states, "Once again a ship bearing Australian refugees and heading toward Iran through the port of Dubai, drowned in the cerulean waters of the Persian Gulf."[133] "For years," she continues, "Iran refused entry to Australian, Canadian and Swiss refugees."[134] She then reports about the latest wave of Westoxification that has swept over Europe and the resulting demonstrations that have taken place in European capitals, as protestors "expressed their anger and aversion to the advancement of European culture and civilization."[135]

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[131] Nora Hosseini, "Har do saat yek nafar bar asar-e alūdegi jān-e khod rā az dast dad-e ast," *Mehr News*, October 27, 2015, http://www.mehrnews.com/news/2951239/%D9%87%D8%B1-%DB%B2-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA-%DB%8C%DA%A9-%D9%86%D9%81%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D8%AB%D8%B1-%D8%A2%D9%84%D9%88%D8%AF%DA%AF%DB%8C-%D9%87%D9%88%D8%A7-%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%B1%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA

[132] Mehrnaz Samimi, "Iran's Struggle with Air Pollution," *Lobelog Foreign Policy*, March 7, 2016, http://lobelog.com/irans-struggle-with-air-pollution/

[133] Mehran Modiri, "Khalāghīat," *Shūkhī Kardam*, 2013, http://www.iranproud.net/series/Shookhi-kardam/episodes/khalaghiat-(dorogh).

[134] Ibid.

[135] Ibid.

This obvious parody of the relationship between Iran and the West simultaneously takes a jab at state media for propagating lies about the state of the Western world. Historically, Iranian refugees have attempted to obtain asylum in countries such as Australia, Canada and Switzerland. Interestingly, the United States is not mentioned, possibly because it is not among the Western countries that more readily admits asylum to Iranian refugees. Furthermore, Europeans are obviously not protesting the advancement of their own culture and civilization. By reporting the opposite of the actual situation in Iran, this satirical news segment mocks and ridicules the Islamic Republic's well-established policy of denouncing the West. The phrases, "Death to the West," and "Death to Europe," which are derivations of the now banal, "Death to America," ridicule the vituperation against the West that has historically characterized the Islamic Republic of Iran.

While each *Shūkhī Kardam* episode includes a satirical news segment, this particular news segment is significant because it sets the tone for the entire show. Essentially, this news segment implies that Iran's government-run media disseminates blatant lies to the people. It mocks the Iranian state's news agency, IRIB, and sarcastically criticizes the false reports and propaganda that it broadcasts to the Iranian public. Modiri circumvented a direct critique of the government by referring to *lying* as "creativity," but he, in fact, posited that the Iranian news media twists the truth and reports events in such a way that Iran is always presented in a favorable light. However indirect his critique may have been, it is evident to his audience that Modiri is in fact ridiculing the lies that are propagated by the Iranian state's official news media.

I asked Pooneh what she thought about the news segment of *Shūkhī Kardam*. She responded that she really liked it. I asked her why and she stated:

> I liked it because it shows the ridiculousness and fakeness of Iran's news perfectly. It shows exactly the problem. They report all of the bad news of the world, so that you can feel fortunate about your situation in Iran. It was very funny.

Pooneh's comment suggests that the show appealed to Iranians because it catered to their tendency to question the truthfulness of state news. Vashti agreed with Pooneh regarding the hilarity of the *Shūkhī Kardam* news segment. I asked her what she found particularly interesting about the sketch, and she stated, "The news in Iran is just like that; it has an orientation like Fox News. Like everything in Iran is great, sunshine and rainbows." Both Pooneh and Vashti mentioned that IRIB reports news selectively, exaggerating situations of turbulence and turmoil in the Western world, while emphasizing Iran's supposed stability.

Of note is the financial segment of the satirical newscast; it reports that the Central Bank of Iran has agreed to grant a loan to the World Bank, which if granted, would rescue the Euro from bankruptcy. The report ends with the announcement that the Iranian rial has reached the equivalent of $14,000 USD, an increase of two dollars since the previous day. This particular segment brings attention to Iran's deplorable economic state during the Ahmadinejad period and the state media's refusal to acknowledge it, by presenting false reports of the country's economic prowess. In 2012, the Iranian rial experienced a sudden depreciation, when it dropped to eighty percent of its value within the year. It has remained relatively steady since its major drop six years ago, never recovering back to its pre-2012 value and is currently 42,012.5 rials to the dollar.

Ahmadinejad Economics

Iran's economic situation rapidly deteriorated during Ahmadinejad's first term. Foreign investors did not trust his economic policies and were further put off by his appointment of

previously unheard of ministers, who boasted little to no economic and political management experience. These investors turned toward neighboring Arab countries, a move which resulted in a stock market crash and an overall loss of confidence in the Iranian national banking system.[136] Mostafa recalled how after Ahmadinejad's 2005 election, his father lost half of his wealth, as his stocks crashed in one day. He stated:

> I will never forget the first year. My dad is a stockholder, big stocks. When he (Ahmadinejad) was elected, my dad hit myself in the head. He was watching television and he said, "Ey vāy! I'm done for!" About half of his wealth was lost. In one day the stock crashed.

Hannah described how Ahmadinejad's election affected her family, specifically because her father was a factory owner. She stated:

> The first time that Ahmadinejad became president, within two to three months we became totally bankrupt. Everything we had, we had to sell. The producers in Iran hit the ground hard during the Ahmadinejad period.

Sohrab, who worked for a private company that produced advertisements (including pictures, films and graphic animations) for factory products, described how work in his field slowly began to dwindle during Ahmadinejad's presidency:

> When Ahmadinejad came, it affected almost all of the factories. It wasn't very obvious at first, but at the end, it became apparent where the stink of this whole mess was coming from. Our work, as commercial artists, slowed down. I remember the guys in the company, during the second [Ahmadinejad] term, would just play video games in the office because there was no work. Because the economy was had been defeated (*shekast khord*).

Sohrab's comment indicates a commonly held belief that Iran's dire economic situation was due to Ahmadinejad's gross incompetence and mismanagement. For example, when appointing his cabinet, Ahmadinejad named four nominees for the minister of oil position, who like himself, lacked professional and administrative experience, but had deep, historic ties to the IRGC. Iran holds ten percent of the world's oil reserves and is the second largest OPEC producer of crude

[136] Ehteshami and Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of Its Neoconservatives*, 75.

oil after Saudi Arabia. It exports two-thirds of the four million barrels it pumps per day, primarily to Japan, China and other Asian countries. Iran procures fifty percent of its revenue and the majority of its foreign currency earnings from these oil sales.[137] As an oil exporting country, along with its natural gas reserves, Iran is of great significance in the global scheme; thus the Iranian oil ministry is a particularly powerful post. After much parliamentary debate and public speculation regarding Ahmadinejad's judgment, the Majlis approved Kazem Vaziri Hamaneh for the post; Hamaneh served as oil minister from 2005 to 2007.[138]

Sohrab compared the situation to the previous administration, stating that in the beginning of the Khatami period there was stability. Khatami's associates and those whom he appointed to his cabinet were progressive and thinking of the future, he said. Sohrab asserted that Khatami's appointees were experts in their fields, citing Karbaschi as an example. However, during the Ahmadinejad period, it was exactly the opposite, he stated, in that "they brought in every person who had nothing to do with these posts, and named them ministers and lawyers." Sepideh reiterated this, recalling that one of Ahmadinejad's campaign slogans was that only competent people worthy of their positions would receive government posts. "But it was exactly the opposite," she recalled, "People who had nothing to do with these ministries were appointed."

Continuing his platform of populism, Ahmadinejad signed an anti-corruption "pact" with his ministers, which was essentially a commitment to forgo all private economic activity, as well as against privileging family members with any sort of financial benefit.[139] He also ordered public banks, whose books were full of non-performing loans, to provide generous loans to the

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[137] Ehteshami and Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of Its Neoconservatives*, 130.
[138] http://newsbbc./uk/2/hi/middle_east/4518300.stm, December 11, 2005.
[139] Ehteshami and Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of Its Neoconservatives*, 78.

ordinary citizens of the country, thereby endearing himself to the lower-middle classes.[140] Hadi described how he was not as severely impacted by Ahmadinejad's election in 2005, but that he could sense a change. He stated:

> I had an ordinary family. My father was self-employed. My mother was a homemaker. We had a very ordinary situation, a middle class family. There wasn't really a direct effect on our lives, in the way that everything would fall apart.

Ahmadinejad's second term ushered in a period of severe economic instability. By the end of his first term, official data from Iran's Central Bank reported an inflation rate of twenty-nine percent, while independent sources placed that number at slightly over forty percent.[141] In the late 2000s, international sanctions began to tighten, reaching their apex in the fall of 2013. International embargos and sanctions affected employment, travel restrictions, monetary transactions and the price of basic commodities. In 2013, for example, Iranian meat prices soared by sixty percent. The Iranian Central Bank reported figures that showed the cost of food had risen by four hundred percent over the last seven years of Ahmadinejad's presidency. Food prices increased because the regime did not allow importers to exchange foreign currency at the official rate, forcing them to trade at the market exchange rate, which was three and a half times higher.[142]

Foreign investments continued to diminish drastically, and Ahmadinejad's re-election sparked tremendous capital flight. In 2009, the equivalent of approximately $300 billion left the country.[143] By the end of Ahmadinejad's presidential tenure, the rial had become devalued by more than one hundred percent against hard currencies. The dire economic mismanagement that

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[140] "Iran and the Bomb: A Government That Thrives on Defiance," *The Economist*, May 6, 2005, 25.
[141] http://www.rahesabz.net/story/64674, (21 Dey 1391), accessed September 11, 2017.
[142] "Meat Prices in Iran Soar by 60 Percent in Recent Days," *NCRI Iran News*, April 21, 2013, http://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/economy/13464-meat-prices-in-iran-soar-by-60-per-cent-in-recent-days.
[143] Mather, Yasamine. "The Latest Economic Crisis in Iran and the Continued Threat of War," *Critique* 37, 1 (2009): 67-79.

had defined Ahmadinejad's two presidential terms left the financial state of country in ruins. It resulted in skyrocket inflation and massive unemployment, of which the Iranian Third Generation bared the greatest brunt.

Ahmadinejad and the Precarious Millenial Generation

Under Ahmadinejad, the Millenial Generation suffered unemployment at a rate twice that of the general unemployed population of Iran. The protracted unemployment and underemployment endured by young Iranians has encouraged a continued and prolonged reliance on their parents. Young Iranians are financially unable to move out and start an independent life. This condition has perpetuated delayed marriage among the demographic, and has ultimately resulted in slowing down the maturation of Millenial Iranians. The percentage of men between the ages of twenty-five and twenty-nine that still live at home and are financially dependent on their parents has increased substantially. In 1984, fifty percent of young Iranian men fell into this category. By the middle of Ahmadinejad's first term, seventy-five percent of young Iranian men had not yet moved into an independent domicile and continued to be financially dependent on their parents.[144]

Modiri astutely satirizes the economic predicament suffered by Millenial Iranians in a *Shūkhī Kardam* sketch involving a father and a son. The sketch begins with the son sitting at the kitchen table, entering work data into his computer. His father interrupts him to show him his cousin's wedding invitation and uses it as a springboard to broach the topic of marriage. The father, while belittling his son, simultaneously demands that he "get a wife." The son responds, "Father, if Mehrdad has gotten married it is because grandfather left him an inheritance. I don't

[144] Djavad Salehi-Isfahani and Daniel Engel, "Youth Exclusion in Iran: The State of Education, Employment and Family Formation," (Virginia: Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Department of Economics, 2007), 7.

have the means." The father replies, "My dear, you just go forward with it and everything will fall into place," a statement that points to the aloof attitude of the parental generation regarding the youth generation's financial woes. The son attempts to reason with his father, outlining how he does not have the means to go forward with this particular step in life. He says, "My dear father, I go to work from six in the morning until eight at night. I get six hundred thousand tomans a month, and that's with a master's degree. How am I supposed to take my wife's hand and bring her home?"[145] The father dismisses his son's response with a click of his tongue, and says that the problem is not the six hundred thousand tomans, but rather that he is afraid to get married. The son reiterates that he does not have the financial means to get married and that his priority now is to work so as to accumulate money, but his father remains steadfast in his assertion that his son is actually afraid of marriage, claiming that when he married his wife, he only made fifteen hundred tomans a month. The son again tries to reason with his father and states that in the past the situation was probably such that fifteen hundred tomans was enough to start a family with. He reiterates that after working for seven years, he has only just now been able to afford to buy a Pride (car) with his a monthly salary of six hundred thousand tomans. Relentless, the father says that with fifteen hundred tomans, he was able to buy a house, get a wife and take her on a honeymoon, and again calls his son a coward. The son becomes increasingly frustrated, repeating that he has to work in order to save money, while the father nonchalantly keeps goading his son that he is too scared to get married. The son finally lets out a frustrated scream and throws himself out of the window. The sketch ends with the father

[145] Modiri, "Ezdevaj," Episode 3, *Shūkhī Kardam*, http://www.iranproud.net/series/Shookhi-kardam/episodes/ezdevaj.

mumbling to himself, "Look at how he jumps … did we jump like that in our day? I think we jumped a bit better. Yes."[146]

This sketch delineates not only the difficult financial situation that Millenial Iranians endured during the Ahmadinejad period, it also points to the aloofness of their parental generation regarding their hardship. Despite boasting a graduate degree and working fourteen hours per day, the son's monthly salary amounted to the equivalent of less than two hundred dollars. Furthermore, the father's insistence on his son getting a wife, despite his son's reasoning that he does not make enough money to take that step, points to tensions between the Third Generation and the prevailing patriarchy. Through this sketch, Modiri indirectly conveys criticism of Ahmadinejad's management of the economy, while expressing empathy with Iran's Millenials. When Ahmadinejad left office, thirty-one to forty percent of Iranians lived under the poverty line, ten percent of which lived in extreme poverty and were essentially deprived access to basic human needs.[147]

During the Ahmadinejad administration, Iran's economy was only capable of employing less than a third of the country's university graduates.[148] After the state crack down on the Green Movement in 2009, an estimated forty five thousand Iranians fled the country and sought asylum abroad.[149] The World Bank reported a net emigration of three hundred thousand people from Iran during Ahmadinejad's second term. Meanwhile, in 2011, PBS Frontline reported that an estimated two hundred thousand university graduates emigrate Iran each year.[150]

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[146] Ibid.
[147] http://www.sharghdaily.ir/Modules/News/PrintVer.aspx?News_Id=40282&V_News_Id=Src=Main
[148] "The Vicious Circle of Iranian Emigration," http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/04/the-vicious-circle-of-iranian-emigration.html, Accessed September 15, 2017.
[149] https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/12/13/why-they-left/stories-iranian-activists-exile, accessed September 15, 2017.
[150] Neda Karimi and Sepideh Gheraati, "Why Do Brains Drain? Brain Drain in Iran's Political Discourse," Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis Across Disciplines 6, No. 2 (2013): 154-173. Akbar Torbat, "The Brain Drain

The following *Shūkhī Kardam* sketch satirizes the plight of these young, educated Iranians who see little hope for a brighter future if they stay in Iran. The sketch begins with a young man packing his suitcase in preparation to escape abroad. Confronted by his father, the young man tells him that he has found a reliable smuggler to take him overseas. His father responds that he is a coward for running away and says, "Be a man! Live in your *own* country!"[151] The son replies, "Dear father, what should I do here? I'm either on Facebook or I'm asleep or I'm idle. I'll go over there and continue my education."[152] The father responds that he should be a man and pursue his education in his own country. The son replies that he has not been allowed into the university for the last three semesters. His father replies, "Who said life is just about studying?! Be a man! Marry in your own country! Start a family in your *own* country!"[153] Similar to the above sketch, the father insists that his son gets married, while the son protests that he has no job, no money, no house and therefore no means to support a wife. His father's solution is that the son "should be a man," which translates as finding a job, making money and working in his *own* country. The son responds that he has been searching for work for three years and that there are either no jobs, or if there are, they require *party*, or their salary is just too low to support a family. The father retorts, "Well who said life is just work?! *I* will work and pay your expenses! You have fun! Enjoy life! But be a man! Enjoy life here, in your own country!"[154] The son asks his father what he is supposed to enjoy, considering the lack of entertainment options available in Iran. Angrily, his father retorts, "If you can't do anything,

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From Iran to the United States," *Middle East Journal* 56, No 2 (2002): 272-295. "The Vicious Circle of Iranian Emigration," *PBS Frontline: Tehran Bureau*, last modified April 22, 2011, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/04/the-vicious-circle-of-iranian-emigration.html.

[151] Mehran Modiri, "Mohājerat," Episode 19, *Shūkhī Kardam*, http://www.iranproud.net/series/Shookhi-kardam/episodes/mohajerat.

[152] Ibid.

[153] Ibid.

[154] Ibid.

then be a man and *die* like a man! At least *die* in your own country!"[155] The frustrated son acquiesces and tells his father that he *will* die in Iran, but reminds him that his death will cost fifty million tomans (the cost of the *Sevom*, *Haftom* and *Chehelom*), plus another thirty million for the one-year anniversary, amounting to a total of eighty million tomans. At this point the demeanor of the father changes, and he asks if the smuggler is reliable and if his son has packed enough warm clothes. He then says, "Well, be a man … if you're going to go abroad, go from the side (illegally) … if you're going to leave your country, then at least sneak out."[156]

Not only does this sketch demonstrate the blatant patriarchy that pervades contemporary Iranian culture, it also shows how this patriarchy functions to undermine and hinder Millenial Iranians. The young man's desire to go abroad in order to become a productive member of society is quashed by his father, who denounces his son for being a coward. Virility is equated with patriotism, and so, according to the dominant patriarchal culture represented by the father, the son's abandonment of his homeland indicates a loss of his manhood. As masculinity is the most revered characteristic in patriarchal culture, the father refuses to allow his son to make this sacrifice, suggesting that he continue his education, start a family and work in his own country. Then, when presented with the fact that none of these traditional means of asserting adult manhood are feasible for the son, the father exasperatedly offers to pay his son's expenses, as long as he stays within the country. The son reminds the father that the state imposed restrictions on Iranian society have made for an environment devoid of options for leisure. Finally the father tells his son that if he cannot do anything, then at the very least, he should *die* like a man, in his own country. The son replies he will acquiesce so long as the father has set aside the eighty million tomans for his funeral and mourning ceremony expenses. It is only at this point that the

[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid.

father suddenly changes his mind and supports his son's departure. The father's willingness to pay his son's expenses due to a lack of employment opportunities again points to a floundering economy that is maintained by cultural patriarchy. The father's insistence that his son can only be a man by staying in Iran highlights how this cultural patriarchy also serves to cripple the Third Generation and holds it in a position of impotence.

Pārty Bāzī: Corruption in the Ahmadinejad Era

Robert Putnam defines social capital as the conglomerate of mutual trust, reciprocity, cooperation and participation. He contends that social capital is a requisite for the political participation and transparency necessary to ensure a functioning democracy. Putnam asserts that social capital is determined by the existence of particular philanthropic behaviors and practices within a society. These practices include: trust in other people, willingness to aid fellow citizens, participation in volunteer work and the giving of alms. In a recent survey aimed at assessing the rank of one hundred forty countries, based on their measure of social capital, Iran ranked 120th.[157]

Before the 1979 Revolution, one of the main grievances against the Pahlavi regime was nepotism; the Shah, his family, and a small circle of his "friends" and supporters (approximately a few hundred families) controlled the vast resources of the state. The 1979 Revolution brought the hope that nepotism would be largely diminished if not completely uprooted in Iran. Khomeini, himself, was supposedly very strict about not allowing any members of his family to utilize state power as a means to enrich themselves.[158] After Khomeini died in 1989, the right

[157] Ayandeban, http://www.ayandeban.ir/iran1393, 2013, Accessed September 11, 2017.
[158] The Ayatollah's oldest son, Mostafa, had passed away in 1977; his youngest son, Ahmad, was a member of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, but he never held an executive position. After Khomeini died in 1989, Ahmad

wing gradually took control of all important state organs, and nepotism once again become rampant.

In terms of nepotism within the ranks of the current Islamic regime, one family has been particularly prominent. The Larijani family consists of five brothers; these five brothers occupy five key posts within Iran's political system. Between them, they dominate two of the top three institutions in the country, the parliament and the judiciary. The most influential of the brothers is Ali Larijani, who serves as the Speaker of the Majles. Ali Larijani forged a very close relationship with Ayatollah Khamenei during the time that he served in the IRGC. He has remained a close confidante of Khamenei since the latter served as the clerical supervisor of the IRGC, as president of the Republic in the 1980s and finally as the current Supreme Leader of Iran.

All together, the Larijani family yields an incredible amount of power in their hands. Sadegh Larijani serves as the chief of the judiciary, while Mohammad Javad (Ardeshir) Larijani has been an important conservative ideologue, serving as deputy for international affairs for Ayatollah Seyyed Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi (Sadegh Larijani's predecessor). During Ahmadinejad's presidency, Mohammad Bagher Larijani served as the deputy minister of health and as the Chancellor of Medical Sciences at Tehran University, but he resigned from this post in December of 2012. In 2013 Dr. Larijani was appointed the President of the Medical Policy Council at the Islamic Azad University and in 2015 he was appointed Deputy Minister of Medical Education of the state. The last brother, Fazel Larijani has served in the diplomatic corps as the Iranian cultural attaché in Ottawa Canada. There is also Ahmad Tavakkoli, whose mother is the maternal aunt of the Larijanis. Tavakkoli is an influential right-wing deputy in the

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was appointed the curator of his father's mausoleum. On March 12, 1995, Ahmad Khomeini suffered a cardiac arrest and slipped into a coma. He died on March 17, 1995, one day after his forty-ninth birthday.

Majles and head of the parliament's research center. He is also a two time presidential candidate and served as the Minister of Labor in the 1980s. While it is not uncommon to see political figures maneuver family members into key positions in Iran, the Larijanis are exceptional due to their numbers and far-reaching control.

Iran is thus considered a highly corrupt state among international watchdog groups. In 2016, Transparency International, a prominent civil organization dedicated to fighting corruption, ranked Iran 131st in their Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) of 176 nations.[159] A major factor affecting the CPI is transparency, or lack thereof. Lack of transparency provides civil servants with opportunities to entertain the advantages of their position and win bribes, and is thus a major contributing factor to corruption. A prominent example of this during the Ahmadinejad period was the case of Abbas Palizdar, who was a member of the Inquiry and Review Committee that the Seventh Majles formed in order to review the performance of the judiciary. During a speech in June 2008, at Bu-Ali Sina University in Hamadan, Palizdar revealed that the Committee had uncovered one hundred and twenty three cases of corruption, including at least forty-two cases involving leading right-wing clerics and officials. These clerics and high-ranking officials included Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi, a member of both the Guardian Council[160] and the Assembly of Experts,[161] Ayatollah Mohammad Emami Kashani, another member of the Guardian Council, Ali Akbar Nategh Nouri, former Speaker of the Majles and special adviser to Khamenei, former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Ali Fallahian, the former Minister of Intelligence, and Mohsen Rafighdoust, a former commander of the IRGC, among many others. Corruption during the Ahmadinejad period was thereby primarily

[159] https://www.transparency.org/country/IRN, accessed September 15, 2017.
[160] A Constitutional body that vets candidates for most elections.
[161] A Constitutional body that appoints the Supreme Leader and monitors his performance.

perpetuated by the rich and the powerful right-wing members of the government, who have historically retained a staunch opposition to reform. Indeed it was during the Ahmadinejad administration that the largest embezzlement scandals in Iranian history took place, which involved the peculation of several billion dollars.

Throughout the past twenty years, the Iranian state has embraced a policy of neoliberalism, specifically though the valorization of individual entrepreneurs, the privatization of markets over rights and the abatement of government sponsored social service programs. Rafsanjani, who served as the third president of the theocracy from 1989-2007, initiated reconstruction efforts and liberalization policies that were followed by the vast expansion of bureaucracy and the rise of rentier capitalism. In such a system, the beneficiaries of nepotism and cronyism received economic rent and consequently, a very small minority of the population came to hold the vast concentration of the country's wealth. Income distribution became highly uneven and inequality widened, while the burden of corruption fell heavily on the poor because they could not afford to pay bribes and did not have a *party* (the term used to refer to inside connections in Iran).

Unemployment affects the Millenial Generation at twice the rate it does the rest of Iran's population. Approximately forty percent of university-educated Millenial Iranians are unemployed, amounting to nearly six million jobless young Iranians.[162] Finding regular employment in contemporary Iran almost always requires an inside connection or a *party*. This is satirically depicted in a *Shūkhī Kardam* sketch that parodies a typical job interview in today's Iran.

In this sketch, an incredibly qualified applicant is interviewing for a job. He studied industrial and mining engineering at Sorbonne University, his dissertation has been translated

[162] Khosravi, *Precarious Iran*, 218.

into seven languages, a production line in Germany has taken up his prototype, he speaks seven languages (and is therefore valuable from the international business standpoint) and is willing to work for a lower salary or even forgo his salary for a while, as long as he is given the opportunity to work. The interviewee, however, has one fault: he was not referred to the company by anyone; rather, he applied for the job based on an ad he saw in the newspaper. After the interviewer realizes this, he sends the applicant out and dismissively tells him that the company will be in touch. The next applicant comes in with a letter and places it on interviewer's desk. The interviewer reads the letter, lights up and warmly welcomes the interviewee, who was referred to by Mr. Karimi (his *party*). This applicant is portrayed as stupid, lazy and unqualified. He boasts no specialty, no interests and even says that he cannot get up in time to be at work by eight thirty in the morning. He does, however, reiterate that he was referred by Mr. Karimi. The interviewer reassures the applicant that he is well aware of this and hires him on the spot.[163] This exaggerated scenario of *pārty bāzi* is based on the reality that inside connections are a necessary component to success and upward mobility in contemporary Iranian society. The expectation of and participation in such a system of corruption, however, evinces a dysfunctional citizenship, as it demonstrates the dearth of citizen rights within a society. This is one of the underlying reasons for the disillusionment sensed by Millenial Iranians during the Ahmadinejad era. The highly qualified applicant without a *pārty* represents the plight of this demographic.

Mocking the Morality Police

The Islamic Republic utilizes patriarchal heterosexuality to control the Iranian public, and does so through both formal and informal policing of public morality. Informal policing is typically undertaken by those referred to as *Hezbollahi* or those with *Hezbollahi* sympathies. In

[163] Modiri, "Eghtesād," *Shūkhī Kardam*.

the post-revolutionary context a *hezbollahi* is someone who zealously supports the Islamic Republic. The word *hezbollah* means "Party of God" and its current connotations derive from the revolutionary period, when a loose knit grass roots network of people, usually connected through mosques, identified themselves as *hezbollahis*. These people were (and continue to be) committed to maintaining the ideals of the Islamic revolution, specifically striving to uphold the religious, rather than the republican, aspects of the "Islamic Republic."[164]

During the Ahmadinejad era and today, formal policing of public morality was done through the *Gasht-e Ershād*, which translates as "guidance patrol." *Gasht-e Ershād* is a police force that is supported by the Basij militia and is tasked with implementing the Islamic state's interpretation of appropriate public conduct. It is a major civil institution, comprised of thousands of men and women who work to enforce a particular vision of Islamic morality and dress code in the Iranian public sphere. While there have been various forms of the "morality police" since the 1979 revolution, *Gasht-e Ershaād* was formed under Ahmadinejad in 2007, during a government crackdown on an increase of Iranians wearing "un-Islamic dress." The *Gasht-e Ershād* has a wide range of powers to enforce Iran's Islamic code of public conduct, including chastising and admonishing offenders, imposing fines and even arresting people for failing to adhere to their modesty standards. Men are occasionally stopped for sporting outlandish hairstyles and more recently, due to the rise of hipster fashion trends, for having beards that supposedly resemble that of jihadists. But *Gasht-e Ershaād* primarily targets women, specifically to ensure the observance of proper *hijab*, which requires women to cover their hair and bodies and discourages the use of cosmetics.

Every *Shūkhī Kardam* episode features a Prisoner and Warden sketch that is tailored to the subject matter of the episode. The sketch depicts a conversation between a heavy-set, sweet-

[164] Siamdoust, *Soundtrack of the Revolution*, 89.

talking, and charismatic prisoner (played by Mehran Ghafourian), and a stern, unseen warden (voiced by Modiri), who has no patience for the prisoner's adulations. In the very first Prisoner-Warden sketch, featured in the "Creativity" episode (discussed earlier in the chapter), the prisoner is brought in from his cell to the warden's office because he has had a number of complaints lodged against him. The warden states that several families and security forces have complained that the prisoner, through impersonation, extorted money from them. The prisoner responds, "Sir, look where misapprehension leads to. I was sporting a green ensemble with black boots. I went to the park and there I saw some incredibly disturbing scenes. I mean they really made my heart ache. The boys and girls then gathered around me and said, 'Sir, please don't be upset, we are all cousins'." The warden replies, "And you took money from them?" To which the prisoner responds, "They insisted! I didn't even want any money. My heart was aching; I did it because it was my *duty* to do so."[165]

This sketch satirizes the role of the morality police by implying that the prisoner dressed up as a member of *Gasht-e Ershād* and accepted bribes from the couples that he spotted in the park. Due to the personal freedom restrictions in Iran, unmarried couples seek spaces in which they can express their emotions to one another without the controlling patriarchal gaze of the state. The park is one such space in which the youth have been able to negotiate a designated place for themselves. For this reason, however, the park is also specifically policed for "immoral" behavior among young Iranians, particularly indications of romance between young, unmarried couples. Public display of affection between unmarried people is considered illegal in Iran and can be subject to punishment. Promiscuous pairs may be taken back to police stations, where they endure whatever punishment is deemed appropriate for their offense. Typically they

[165] Mehran Modiri, "Khalāghīāt," Shūkhi Kardam, 2013, http://www.iranproud.net/series/Shookhi-kardam/episodes/khalaghiat-(dorough).

are subject to a fine, often paid for by their parents, who are summoned to the station to collect their children. However, as the current Islamic state engenders corruption in all realms of Iranian society (as discussed in the previous section), young Iranians who are intercepted for partaking in immoral conduct (e.g. romantic gestures, or even just cavorting in mixed-gender company) will offer a bribe to the morality police to avoid being taken in.

Prior to the making and distribution of *Shūkhī Kardam*, a film came out based on the same premise as the Prisoner and Warden sketch described above. *Gasht-e Ershād* was a 2012 comedy film directed by Saeed Soheili, which depicted three urban working-class men who impersonate a morality police crew as a scheme to make money. The film was released during the Nowruz season of 2012. Despite having had the approval of the Ministry of Culture and winning an award at the Fajr Movie Festival, the film was attacked by hardliner clerics and was eventually pulled off the screen. Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami, a member of the Assembly of Experts, referred to the film as "immoral" and "obscene". Ansār-e Hezbollah, a paramilitary group, protested outside of the Ministry of Culture building with banners that read, "Families of the Martyrs, we are ashamed," and demanded that the screening of the movie be suspended within forty-eight hours. The Islamic Propagation Organization's Art Center also refused to screen the film in all of its sixty-two cinemas. *Gasht-e Ershād* was thus only shown in fifteen movie theaters throughout the country and for a brief period of thirty-one days before it was banned entirely. Even so, it managed to become a box-office hit and became one of the highest grossing films of 1391 (2012-2013).[166] Alex Shams claims that the film's success was due to its underlying mockery of the morality police, which tacitly questioned the legitimacy of the institution. The film suggests that the morality police have ulterior motives. Such an implication

[166] Arash Karami and Negar Mortazavi, "Behind the Curtain: Two Popular Movies Pulled from Screens after Protests," *Frontline: Tehran Bureau*, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2012/04/behind-the-curtain-two-popular-movies-pulled-from-screens-after-protests.html, April 4, 2012.

has great appeal among Iran's middle-class youth, who form a substantial portion of Iran's movie going population.[167] Similarly, the *Shūkhī Kardam* sketch about the morality police imposter taking bribes from the youth only reiterates this sentiment. The growing sense of *Gasht-e Ershād*'s illegitimate exercise of power is a major contributing factor to the sense of disillusionment felt by young Iranians.

Vashti talked about how the morality police was much more ominous during Ahmadinejad's presidency. She commented that summer was the "*Gasht-e Ershād* season," because Iranian women loosen up their hijabs during the warmer months. She then clarified:

> Their manteaux become more open and they push back their headscarves. I mean it's not actually seasonal, but they (the *Gasht-e Ershād*) don't have the same amount of activity all year long. You can look long term between the different administrations and see how their activity has fluctuated. Like during Ahmadinejad's presidency … they suddenly became very active, despite what he had said during his campaign.

Vashti is referring to an interview that took place during Ahmadinejad's first campaign run in 2005. In an interview, Ahmadinejad had rhetorically asked, "Is our country's biggest problem *really* the hair of our youths?"[168] Vashti recalled that this statement became one of Ahmadinejad's slogans throughout his campaign, but "When he became president, we had the most active *Gasht-e Ershād* yet," she said. Vashti then commented on the evolution of the *Gasht-e Ershaād* between administrations. She recalled how during the Ahmadinejad period, "the women in the black chadors" (*khāharān-e zeinab*, or Zeinab Sisters) would suddenly appear in the street as a block. She recalled that their interactions with Iranian youth were often very violent, both verbally and physically. These interactions were filmed by bystanders on their phones and posted onto social media sites, which in turn inspired a substantial public outrage and

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[167] Alex Shams, "Politics of the Iranian Box Office: Mocking the Morality Police and Green Movement Conspiracies," *Ajam Media Collective*, https://ajammc.com/2012/04/12/politics-of-the-iranian-box-office-mocking-the-morality-police-and-a-green-movement-conspiracy-flick/, April 12, 2012.
[168] "Ahmadinejad on People," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQ8pkIRwws8, published May 1, 2016, accessed August 14, 2017.

ultimately initiated a change in procedure. She described the *Gasht-e Ershād*'s amended approach, stating:

> They have changed their tone so that it sounds more kind, but even that still gives us the creeps, in such a way that the meat falls off your bones. Now they *talk* to you. Often times there's a mullah and he'll talk to you; he'll 'guide' you, and then you sign something, you give *ta'hod* (commitment) that you'll never do it again.

In his ethnography of the Third Generation, Khosravi applies Foucault's notion of pastoral power to explain the power dynamics and hierarchies that uphold the Iranian social structure. He asserts that pastoral power is a supplement to discipline-oriented power, imposed by patriarchal institutions, such as the state, religion, parents and teachers. In the context of contemporary Iran, pastoral power seeks to moralize the corporeal bodies of young people, citing a concern for their welfare and seeking to ensure their salvation. As Ayatollah Bojnourdi, a former member of the Supreme Judicial Council, had declared, "Penalty in Islam is correction rather than punishment."[169]

Vashti's description of the shift in the morality police's approach thus confirms Khosravi's assertion regarding the Islamic state's use of pastoral power. I asked Vashti if signing a *ta'hod* gives a person a record, or a file of sorts. She responded:

> It's supposed to give you this feeling, but it's not like you actually have a file … They mostly just want to scare you with this sense [of fear]. The *Gasht-e Ershād* suddenly become active at times, about things they didn't have a problem with before … then, two weeks later, they don't care again. That's the problem … it's something very fluid, unstructured … it's not like they say your manteaux has to be a particular number of centimeters long, or your make up should be a certain way. If they want to give you a hard time, they will.

Vashti's comment indicates the arbitrary nature of the power and discipline enforced by the morality police. Pooneh reiterated this subjectivity, recalling an incident in which the *Gasht-e Ershād* detained her cousin due to the color of her headscarf. "It was yellow," she stated, "And

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[169] Khosravi, *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, 27. IRNA, November 29, 1995.

her shoes were yellow. And her purse was yellow. It was just too happy, so they got her for that." Pooneh also mentioned the difference in behavior of the *Gasht-e Ershād* between Rouhani's administration and Ahmadinejad's. She described how despite their presence at most stop lights in Iran currently, the *Gasht-e Ershād* only gives out warnings to girls sporting the style of manteaux currently in fashion (open and unbuttoned, like a robe) stating, "They aren't mean to people … nor do they force them into the vans. That sort of thing happened four or five years ago, during the Ahmadinejad period. Then, there would be fights, as we would see in the videos … but it's gotten better with Rouhani." Vashti and Pooneh's comments indicate that the *Gasht-e Ershād* interacted with Third Generation Iranians in a harsher and more arbitrary manner during the Ahmadinejad administration. This contributed significantly to the overall sense of frustration and discontent that characterized Millenial Iranians throughout this time period.

University Stories

Approximately 1.2 million Iranian applicants take the *Konkur*[170] each year, of which only fifteen percent are admitted to universities and institutions of higher education.[171] This exam, taken by graduating high school seniors is a ranking system that determines what majors are available to students and which government funded institutions they may attend. The number of slots at each institution is limited because they are at federally funded universities, where the Iranian government pays for student tuitions. During the Ahmadinejad era, Iran's economy was only capable of employing approximately twenty-seven percent of the country's university

[170] The *Konkur* (from the French Concours) Exam is name of the Iranian University Entrance Exam. It is a standardized test used to gain admission to higher education in Iran.
[171] IRNA, December 15, 1999.

graduates, while the rest remained unemployed or severely underemployed.[172] University graduates fortunate enough to have secured a job, typically only made the equivalent of five hundred dollars a month in Ahmadinejad's Iran.[173] Lack of employment options, in conjunction with severely limited social freedom, therefore, encouraged the flight of Iran's educated elite. According to official statistics, nearly two hundred thousand university graduates emigrate Iran per year, seeking a better life and more opportunity abroad. This has resulted in a phenomenon called *farār-e maghzhā* (literally, "the escape of the brains" or brain drain). In recent years, hundreds of thousands of Iranians have left the country seeking jobs and higher salaries. According to Iran's National Elites Foundation (a government-run organization that supports academically gifted and high-achieving students), at least forty percent of the highest performing students with undergraduate degrees in science and engineering leave Iran to pursue advanced degrees abroad.[174] The IMF has reported that between 150,000 and 180,000 students emigrate from Iran each year.[175] During the 2012-2013 academic year, 8700 Iranian students came to study in the United States, a twenty-five percent increase from the previous year. Furthermore, nearly ninety percent of Iranian doctoral students remain in the United States after they graduate.[176]

A mass exodus of Iran's brightest minds thus characterized the Ahmadinejad period. *Shūkhī Kardam* included a sketch that ridicules the Ahmadinejad administration's response to the brain drain. The sketch depicts a talk show host interviewing a fictional character, Professor

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[172] "The Vicious Circle of Iranian Emigration," http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/04/the-vicious-circle-of-iranian-emigration.html, Accessed September 15, 2017.
[173] Ibid.
[174] Golnar Motevalli, "Iran's Brain Drain is the West's Gain," *Bloomberg* (May 8, 2014), http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-05-08/irans-best-engineering-science-grads-take-skills-abroad.
[175] Neda Karimi and Sepideh Gheraati, "Why Do Brains Drain? Brain Drain in Iran's Political Discourse," Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis Across Disciplines 6, No. 2 (2013): 154-173. Akbar Torbat, "The Brain Drain From Iran to the United States," *Middle East Journal* 56, No 2 (2002): 272-295.
[176] Motevalli, "Iran's Brain Drain is the West's Gain," *Bloomberg*.

Kafibeyg, who boasts the bombastic title: Deputy Director of the Headquarters for Laying Out the Groundwork for the Return of the Immigrant Geniuses to the Whole of the Country. In this hilariously acute satirical piece, the professor describes the economic incentives that will be offered to entice Iranian geniuses to return to their home country. He states:

> Fortunately, my colleagues at the various ministries and the private sector have considered a very valuable support and commendation package. First of all, the base salary for these magnanimous people begins at 800,000 tomans and that, with one hundred and fifty hours of overtime, actually amounts to 965,000 tomans. Subsidies are paid into their accounts before everyone else. The fuel card that we have in mind for them allots three hundred liters of gasoline for those who have a bachelor's degree and four hundred liters for those who have a PhD. Most importantly, in the private sector, the commodity basket that has been envisioned for them has *two* extra boxes of macaroni, a bigger hunk of cheese, a fifty-thousand toman gift card and the privilege of not having to wait in line to pay for excess baggage at the airport.[177]

This satirical offer of sub-par incentives delivers a sharp jab at the Islamic state for its lackadaisical efforts to reverse the brain drain. When the host asks the professor what has been considered in terms of employment, lodging, insurance and the like for the returning intelligentsia, the professor responds, "That will all fall into place on its own. As they said in the past, 'Money for three things will always be (divinely) supplied: the money for a wedding, the money for having children and the money to return our geniuses back home'."[178] This vague response, which invokes the interference of a greater power, again satirizes the Iranian state's inability to stop the brain drain and mocks the faith in kismet that characterizes the theocracy (and greater Iranian society). The sketch thereby posits an impotent administration incapable of providing enough incentive to stop the egression of the country's intellectual resources.

The Ahmadinejad administration spent less than two and a half percent of the country's gross domestic product on science and technology research. This lack of investment in science, along with the emphasis on religious ideology in higher education, has driven and continues to

[177] Modiri, "Mohājerat," *Shūkhi Kardam*.
[178] Ibid.

drive Iran's brightest minds into the arms of the "imperial" west.[179] Students have increasingly left Iran because they sought an environment where they could blossom and grow intellectually. Young Iranians with greater intellectual capacity specifically felt hindered by the academic limitations that they encountered during the Ahmadinejad era and therefore sought out educational and employment opportunities abroad.

Sepideh described how Ahmadinejad's election affected her university atmosphere. She stated:

> I remember when Ahmadinejad was elected; I had just started my master's degree. They changed the dean of our school. Ms. Rahnavard (Mousavi's wife) was the head of our department. They replaced her and then everything changed, starting with our hijab. When Ahmadinejad came to office, they (the university) began to clamp down. Like, as soon as we would enter the university gate, they would nitpick at everything. Like, 'Why is your veil pushed back?' or 'Why are you wearing makeup?' or 'Why are your pants short?' They would pick on *everything*. Then they replaced a series of our faculty members with their own people. I later learned that a number of these *chadoris* who were put on the faculty, had ties to the regime.

Vashti described her experience beginning her undergraduate education at IUT in tandem with Ahmadinejad taking office. She stated:

> We entered the university at the same time that Ahmadinejad took office. The university stopped allowing students to go on mixed gender field trips. They replaced the university presidents with people who were more religious and were closer to him (Ahmadinejad). Everything became unhinged. We couldn't even sit next to each other. Like you could see the change perfectly in the second year, compared to the first. The University *herasāt* acquired power; they would come up and ask why boys and girls were talking to one another. This was during Ahmadinejad's first term. When I graduated with my bachelor's degree, his first term ended.

Vashti and Sepideh's descriptions of the change in the university environment reflect the religious conservatism and stifled academic atmosphere that the Ahmadinejad administration engendered. Vashti's mention of the *herāsat* is particularly interesting because it demonstrates how the lower-class supporters of Ahmadinejad realized the benefit of his presidency, and

[179] Motevalli, "Iran's Brain Drain is the West's Gain," *Bloomberg*.

empowered them to exert their authority within the traditionally progressive and liberal realm of the university.

The Khatami Era witnessed the inception of a steady rise of education among Iranian women. As of 1998, more women have been admitted to and graduated from Iran's universities than men. In 2001, that percentage peaked at 61.4 percent but diminished during the Ahmadinejad presidency.[180] As mentioned before, Ahmadinejad's presidency coincided with Vashti's tenure as a university student; she attended Isfahan University of Technology (IUT) for both her undergraduate and graduate degree from 2005-2012. IUT is one of the most prestigious engineering universities in Iran. I asked her whether she felt she had the potential to academically flourish within the Iranian University system during the Ahmadinejad administration. She responded that the issue of patriarchy within the school system was a great hindrance due to the misogynist and patriarchal atmosphere it created in the university. She stated:

> I was in the mining engineering school and like here, in the United States, the number of male students was higher than the number of female students in this field. But they even tried to limit admittance to only men during the Ahmadinejad period. I recently asked my friend about it and she said that this is no longer the case. They did it for a year, but now, there are both boys and girls in the department.

During Ahmadinejad's second term, a new regulation was passed that banned women from seventy-seven academic fields at the graduate level in the country's thirty-six universities. The ban was partially repealed when Hassan Rouhani became president in 2014, at which point women once again constituted approximately sixty percent of the college admittances.

Pooneh, who attended the University of Tehran for both her bachelor's degree and master's degree, recollected the sexism she encountered as a female university student during the Ahmadinejad era. She commented that the effects of gender discrimination within the university

[180] Azardamaki, 80.

setting went beyond the academic realm. Not only did it render female students less confident in the classroom, it also hindered their post graduation employment options, she said. Despite the fact that there are twice as many Iranian women than men with university degrees, their rate of unemployment is also twice as high.[181]

Pooneh claimed that in terms of hiring, the University of Tehran was oriented toward men, citing her own cohort as an example. Of her peers who graduated with literature degrees from the University of Tehran, none of the women were hired as university faculty, while four of the men from her class are now professors at the University of Tehran. This was despite the merits and academic achievements of her female classmates, which ranged from ranking first in the *Konkur* to winning gold medals in all three levels of the Olympiad.

Systematic gender discrimination, specifically targeting *single* women, continues into the Rouhani era. In October 2015, the Majlis passed a bill that required marriage as a requisite for employment as a university professor or schoolteacher, as well as for obtaining a passport and for receiving funding for doctoral programs abroad. The bill was named "A Plan for Increasing the Population and Enhancement of the Family," and included the following objectives:

> To prioritize the employment of married men with children, then married men without children, then married women with children, then married women without children. To employ single applicants should not be any problem as long as there are not any married applicants.
>
> To forbid the employment of single persons in the scientific boards of public and private universities, research centers or as teachers at all levels in the education system … exceptions could be make for genius singles.[182]

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[181] Roksana Bahramitash, "Islamic Fundamentalism and Women's Employment in Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 16, No. 4, 551-68.
[182] http://www.mehrnews.com/news/2112861, accessed September 21, 2017.

State sanctioned gender discrimination within both the academic realm and labor market, therefore, provide yet another reason for the socio-political disillusionment of Iran's Millenials.[183]

Conclusion

Ahmadinejad's two-term presidency coincided with the inception of the Post-Network Era, the result of an ongoing technological revolution that has transformed the nature of television. An onslaught of new media technologies and distribution methods provided viewers with unprecedented choice and control over their television watching experience, which in turn raised their expectations of entertainment, convenience and mobility. The primary force behind the inauguration of this Post-Network Era is the generation born after 1980, which has grown up accustomed to using a multitude of communication technologies. Iranian Millenials fall into this demographic of media agnostics, who despite experiencing the attributes of the Post-Network Era at a delayed pace, exhibit a technological savvy that rivals their western counterparts and are only hindered in this regard by the limitations imposed by the authoritarian theocracy. New distribution methods of the Post-Network Era began with DVD sales and have since evolved to Internet-deliverable television. This is not yet an option in contemporary Iran, and the sale of DVDs remains the primary means through which Iranians engage in post-network era behaviors.

In this chapter, I examined *Shūkhī Kardam* as an example of nonlinear prized content. The DVD distribution of this show permitted a more trenchant criticism of Iranian society, as the issues raised in the series included: a general distrust of official state organs, the dire economic state of the country, rampant corruption extant in all sectors of society and the overall precarious

[183] Debrah Amos, "Iranian Women Make a Push for Greater Opportunities," *Morning Edition*, March 5, 2014, http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2014/03/05/285785498/iranian-women-make-a-push-for-greater-opportunities.

situation of young Iranians. Throughout this chapter I have demonstrated how the societal ailments broached in the show were exacerbated throughout Ahmadinejad's presidential tenure and have thus led to a prevailing sense of disillusionment among the Iranian Millenial Generation. This disillusionment, in tandem with the increasing reliance on convenience technologies that became normalized during this period, precipitated the adaptation of Post-Network participatory culture among Millenial Iranians, which ultimately resulted in the emergence of a new media environment.

Spreadable Sooriland: Millenial Generation Culture Creation

Sooriland is an Iranian web animation production company founded by Soroush Rezaee. Rezaee uses satire to criticize Iranian society in a way that specifically appeals to the Third Generation. On August 6, 2013, Sooriland posted "Postmodern Beggars" on Facebook. The animation targets one of the more prominent facets of Millenial Generation identity, its obsession with social media, with a specific jab at the "liking" culture that has developed within this demographic. "Postmodern Beggars" was Rezaee's break-through piece; it received more "likes" than any other Sooriland production (49,548 likes as of January 2017), was shared over forty thousand times, and essentially went "viral."

In, *Spreadable Media*, Henry Jenkins pushes back against the idea of "viral" media, and instead posits what he has termed "spreadable" media. Spreadable media refers to content that is more prone to *deliberate* circulation. It counters the concept of something going "viral," which Jenkins likens to the spread of an infection, by putting agency back into the act of circulating. Jenkins defines circulation as a hybrid system, partially shaped by corporate decisions, but increasingly determined by "unauthorized" acts of circulation by grassroots groups and individuals. These unauthorized acts of circulation serve to expand our role (as a collective of non-corporate individuals) in dictating how media travels through culture. If spreadable media has the power to transform culture, as Jenkins argues, the *act* of circulation then generates cultural value and meaning. This participation gives shape to our media ecosystem, and by extension, to contemporary culture. As mentioned above, "Post-Modern Beggars" was shared almost as many times as it was liked on Facebook, rendering Sooriland an apt example of spreadable media.

In this chapter, I argue that Sooriland cartoons reflect the anxieties, insecurities and self-criticisms of the audience with which they most deeply resonate, Millenial Iranians. Drawing on Jenkins's theory of spreadability, I contend that young Iranians create cultural value through liking, posting and sharing these animations. The circulation of Sooriland animations thus contributed to the creation of a new media environment, in which the collective disillusionment of the Millenial Generation combined with its adaptation of Post-Network participatory practices, resulted in the emergence and ultimately the prevalence of a commodity culture as a definitive feature of contemporary Iranian society.

Participatory Culture, Sooriland and the Third Generation

Cultural studies have traditionally defined media consumption as an act of meaning production. Circulation is also a creative act, in that individuals make deliberate decisions regarding the content that they share, with whom they share it and for what purpose. Participation is the process through which individuals circulate, reshape and deliver content to specific audiences, utilizing new systems of production and distribution that are independent from broadcasting corporations. Jenkins contends that the ascendency of participatory culture (of the Post-Network Era) has fostered a media environment in which there is greater diversity and democracy over the kinds of content that is circulated; he thus posits a new media model in which value is no longer commoditized.

Participatory culture, therefore, represents a counter force to the preponderance of network culture, as it accords individuals with the capacity to produce and circulate meaningful content. Content takes on a new meaning each time it travels through a different network, and has various meanings for various segments of the population. The meaning of content depends

on the network within which it is circulating. Audiences create cultural value by sharing a media product and attributing meaning to it within their social network. As Jenkins observes, when content creators demonstrate an understanding of the values and sensibilities of a particular community, their product resonates more deeply with that specific audience and therefore accrues more meaning.

Soroush Rezaee is a particularly remarkable content creator in the realm of Iranian social media and among Iran's Millenial Generation. An article in *Hamshahri* magazine lauded Rezaee's animations as "extremely popular on social media," to such a degree that "within a few hours they receive tens of thousands of likes."[184] At the time of the article's publication, Sooriland's Facebook page had approximately 100,000 followers; today, that number has reached over 330,000. As Iranians have shifted over from Facebook to Instagram, Sooriland's Instagram page reflects a more accurate representation of the brand's popularity; as of February 2018, it boasts 1.7 million followers.

Sohrab commented on the relevance of Sooriland to the everyday life of contemporary Iranians. He recalled how the first time he saw Sooriland, he was most impressed by the juxtaposition of an extremely simple animation style with such insightful commentary on everyday life in Iran. He stated:

> I saw that it was a very simple animation, I mean really simple regarding its make. But it was very clear-sighted. The most important characteristic of Sooriland is that it presents good thoughts and ideas. The performance itself is very simple, like I think he uses flash software. But the ideas are good.

Sohrab's observation reflects why Sooriland enjoys such popularity among the Millenial Generation; the animations demonstrate Rezaee's ability to empathize with his audience.

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[184] Interview with Soroush Rezaee, "Goft o gū bā Soroush Rezaee, animayshunsāz-e javān," *Hamshahri*, September 14, 2013, https://web.archive.org/web/20140307154754/http://www.hamshahrimags.com/NSite/FullStory/News/?Id=27146, accessed February 17, 2017.

During the interview with *Hamshahri*, Rezaee asserted that the average age of Facebook users in Iran is nineteen years old. He attributed Sooriland's popularity to its appeal to this demographic, claiming that young Iranians are more prone to like, post and share content. Rezaee also acknowledged that this was the reason for his page having more "likes" than that of Abbas Kiarostami, the world-famous, Oscar-winning director. He stated, "The world is traveling toward virtual communications. For this reason, perhaps a filmmaker, who does not have the patience to upload his film onto Facebook or the Internet, will not be valued. His work won't even be seen."[185] Rezaee's description of Iran's current media environment exemplifies Jenkins's model of a new media ecosystem, in which value is no longer merely commoditized.

Spreadable Media and the Green Movement

Jenkins asserts that the growth of networked communication, in tandem with participatory culture, has facilitated new resources for various publics to have their voices heard. Social media proved to be one such resource, as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube were the most significant platforms for participation during the 2009 Green Movement. In the days that followed the 2009 presidential election, Iranian activists organized protests using Twitter to announce the time and place of gatherings, sending out tweets which were then re-tweeted again and again. The one hundred and forty character limit of Tweets guaranteed the wide circulation of the message through mobile phones, which would otherwise be hindered by slow data transfers.[186] Throughout the month of June, #iranelection was tweeted more than ten thousand times per hour. The hashtag remained the highest-ranking global hashtag on Twitter for two

[185] Ibid.
[186] Andrea Duranti, "The Green Screen: Neda and the Lost Voices," *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 1355.

weeks following the presidential election, dropping momentarily after the unexpected death of Michael Jackson.[187]

According to the Communications News Agency, there were a reported fifty million cell phones in use during the 2009 presidential election in Iran. The introduction of the smart phone to Iran coincided with Ahmadinejad's first time election, and initiated the Post-Network, Post Reform Era, rendering young Iranians particularly prone to a culture of "content sharing." Smart phones thus enabled and encouraged users to take photographs and videos and upload them onto social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Andrea Duranti observes that this burgeoning culture of content sharing has resulted in the creation of an "acephalous and unstructured community of young people around or under the age of thirty, used to communicating through the Internet."[188] Duranti unwittingly describes Lotz's concept of "media agnosticism" as it has manifested among the Iranian Millenial Generation. Within a week of the uprising, hundreds of amateur videos were filmed by protestors and bystanders on their mobile devices and uploaded onto the aforementioned social networking sites, giving rise to the phenomenon of citizen journalism. Sohrab recalled:

> Those who had a VPN, or had access to other ways, would quickly spread the news. They would take videos with their cellphones and put them up. The one new phenomenon that occurred in this field is citizen journalism. They say that the foundation for citizen journalism took place in Iran in '88.

Sohrab described how citizen journalists countered state news reports of a calm and peaceful election aftermath by sending videos that they took of street clashes between protestors and state agents to the BBC. The BBC would then broadcast these videos, thus exposing the falsity of official Iranian news reports. As the number of these cases increased, Sohrab recalled that the Iranian state adapted the technique of insisting that the video clips were fabricated.

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[187] Mottehadeh, *#iranelection*, 7.
[188] Duranti, "The Green Screen: Neda and the Lost Voices," 1354.

"This is why the Internet and cellphones were so important," Sohrab said. By posting, sharing and circulating videos, Iranians created meaning, positing an alternative reality to the situation that was reported and circulated by the Iranian state.

The 2009 Iranian presidential election and its aftermath thus inspired a great deal of celebratory rhetoric regarding the political use and benefits of social media technologies.[189] Indeed social networking sites were considered vital to publicizing and circulating the Iranian political crisis, both to and among, a global audience. Sean Aday, however, asserts that Twitter and new media platforms were mostly consequential in conveying information about the protests to the outside world, citing that less than a hundred people were behind the in-country Twitter traffic during the Green Movement. Aday's report not only reaffirms that the outside world's perception of the protests were primarily shaped by Twitter and amateur videos uploaded onto YouTube and Facebook, it also demonstrates how their circulation abetted meaning production.[190] As Nima Naghibi observes, social media facilitates a marriage between immediacy and intimacy, thus providing a medium through which people can emotionally connect with one another. He suggests that social media has conditioned people to privilege emotion over reason and posits that emotion acts as the driving force behind global action. Naghibi also contends that emotionally inspired action, particularly online activism, may manifest as what has been pejoratively termed as "slacktivism."

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[189] Nima Naghibi, "Diasporic Disclosures: Social Networking, Neda and the 2009 Iranian Presidential Election," *Biography* 34 (2011): 56.

[190] Sean Aday et al., *Blogs and Bullets: New Media in Contentious Politics* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace/Peaceworks, 2010), https://www.usip.org/publications/2010/09/blogs-and-bullets-new-media-contentious-politics, accessed November 13, 2017.

Slactivism: The Myth of Resistance

"Slacktivism" is a portmanteau of slacker and activism. While the origins of the term is debated, Frank Clark and Dwight Ozard take credit for coining it during a seminar series that they held together in 1995. Initially "slacktivism" had a positive connotation; Clark and Ozard used the term to refer to bottom-up, small-scale activities undertaken by young people to benefit society on a more personal level. The term gained prominence as websites and news platforms began to integrate social media sites into their interface, to provide people with the option of "liking," "sharing" or "tweeting" something that they considered of value to their social network.[191] Now days, slacktivism refers to electronic forms of political participation, such as signing Internet petitions, joining community organizations (without contributing to the organization's efforts) and copying/pasting social network statuses or messages. Evgeny Morozov uses the term to refer to easily performed activities that are more affective in making the participant feel good about himself rather than achieving a particular political goal.[192] Henry Brady defines political participation as an "action by ordinary citizens directed toward influencing some political outcome."[193] Robert Putnam contends that the Internet has had a detrimental effect on civic engagement, while Stuart Shulman posits that Internet activities must effectively further political interests if they are to be considered on par with off-line forms of civic engagement.[194] The main criticism against slacktivism, therefore, is that the activities it encompasses are incapable of achieving their intended political goals. Thus, while scholars

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[191] Henrik Serup Christensen, "Political Activities on the Internet: Slacktivism or Political Participation by Other Means," *First Monday* 16 (2011), http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3336/2767, accessed November 10, 2017.
[192] Evgeny Morozov, "The Brave New World of Slactivism," *Foreign Policy*, May 19, 2008, http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/05/19/the-brave-new-world-of-slacktivism/, accessed November 10, 2017.
[193] Henry Brad, "Political Participation," in *Measures of Political Attitudes*, ed. by John Robinson, et al. (San Diego: Academic Press, 1999).
[194] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). Stuart Shulman, "The Case Against Mass-Emails: Perverse Incentives and Low Quality Public Participation in U.S. Federal Rulemaking," *Policy and Internet*, Vol. 1, Iss. 1 (2009).

lauded the benefits of social media technologies in perpetuating the Green Movement, Iranians acknowledged and even ridiculed the correlation of the revolutionary uses of social media for political purposes with slacktivism. Rezaee conveyed this sentiment in the Sooriland animation, "Myths of Resistance."

Almost four years after the 2009 election and the Green Movement, Sooriland published "Myths of Resistance" on March 28, 2013. In this animation, the main character, Khafan Pesar,[195] desperately seeks a means to connect to Facebook, which in Iran involves finding a filter-buster (*fīlter-shekan*) to allow access to the government-blocked site. Based on his urgent assertion that he has "work to do" on Facebook, one assumes that Khafan Pesar's desperation is warranted by his need to partake in Internet activism. Instead, once Khafan Pesar is able to get online and log onto Facebook, he immediately sets out to troll a random celebrity. After an extensive session of "trolling," he breathes a sigh of relief and declares that his conscience is clear.[196]

Despite Rezaee's critique of slacktivism in this animation, unprecedented use of social media during the Green Movement ultimately transformed Iran's media ecology, to one that fostered a participatory culture, as Jenkins proposed. Social media thus became a platform for convergence, a means through which Millenial Iranians could engage in collective action and intelligence, through sharing and circulating content that they attributed meaning to.

The Internet in Iran

In the Middle East, Iran was second only to Israel in gaining access to the Internet. It was launched in 1992, at Iran's Institute of Theoretical Physics and Mathematics, and quickly spread

[195] Translates as "Awesome Boy".
[196] Soroush Rezaee, "Ostūrehāye Moghāvemat," *Sooriland*, https://www.facebook.com/SooriLand/videos/10200639565327329/, March 28, 2013.

throughout the country's university systems.[197] By 1995, Western news media were already reporting that, "If the computer geeks are right, Iran is facing the biggest political revolution since the Ayatollah Khomeini."[198] Sreberny and Khiabany propose that the Millenial Generation's use of the Internet demonstrates a trend in twentieth century technological revolutions that have engendered generational change and political revolution.[199] Sohrabi-Haghighat, on the other hand, argues that new media does not reshape social structures in the actual world, but rather reflects already extant social and political conditions.[200] The Islamic state encouraged the development and expansion of the Internet from its inception, specifically for the purposes of promoting revolutionary ideology and state propaganda.[201] Seminaries in Qom and Mashhad were among the first institutions in Iran to embrace the Internet for educational purposes; it functioned as a new medium through which clerics could offer spiritual guidance. Even Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei launched his own website in 2004.

M. Hadi Sohrabi-Haghighat and Shohreh Mansouri observe that in the domestic environment, the Internet functions to weaken a state's repressive capacity by providing protestors with a venue in which they can evade state regulation. The Internet facilitates the means through which social movements are able to challenge top-down hierarchies and influence and encourage participation in said movements. It provides social movements with the capacity to circumvent established mass media organizations, which are the gatekeepers of news and events, and thus allows insurgents access to an independent venue to spread their messages. In

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[197] Abbas Johari, "Internet Use in Iran: Access, Social and Educational Issues," *Educational Technology, Research and Development* 50, no. 1 (2002): 81-84.
[198] C. Bogart, "Chat Rooms and Chadors," *Newsweek*, August 20, 1995, http://www.newsweek.com/chat-rooms-and-chadors-182316, accessed October 4, 2017.
[199] Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany, *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).
[200] Mohammad Hadi Sohrabi-Haghighat, "New Media and Social-Political Change in Iran," *CyberOrient* 5, no. 1 (2011), http://www.cyberorient.net/article.do?articleId=6187, accessed October 5, 2017.
[201] Baback Rahimi, "The Politics of Internet in Iran," in *Media, Culture and Society in Iran*, 41.

doing so, social movements can contend with the narratives produced by the mass media.[202] Indeed communication among insurgents plays a vital role in the development of any social movement and without it the survival of the movement is highly unlikely.[203] Echoing part of Aday's assertion, Sohrabi-Haghighat and Mansouri argue that ICTs[204] functioned to enhance political opportunities during the Green Movement by providing the means to reach international allies, however, they assert that this functions to simultaneously weaken the repressive capacity of the state.

After China, Iran is said to boast the toughest Internet control and filtering system in the world, facilitated by its own scientific innovations in the field. For example, the Iranian state has devised ways of manipulating new media for its own purposes, by constructing fronts, infiltrating anti-government networks for information gathering and spreading messages to its own advantage. Furthermore, the Iranian state has made major purchases from technological behemoths, such as Nokia Siemens, which it later renamed Nokia Networks, to enhance its position within the cyber battlefront.[205]

Control over the Internet in Iran greatly intensified after the first election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, and continues to the present day.[206] While the state began a policy of blocking and filtering certain sites such as Facebook and YouTube, Millenial Iranians have developed a high level of technological literacy and apply it to circumventing government controls and restrictions, through such devices as filter breakers and VPNs. Siamdoust observes that before the 2009 election, it had been possible to easily bypass filters by using VPN

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[202] Hadi Sohrabi-Haghighat and Shohre Mansouri, "Where Is My Vote? ICT Politics in the Aftermath of Iran's Presidential Election," *International Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society* 8 (2010): 29.
[203] Ibid., 30.
[204] Information and Communications Technology
[205] Nate Anderson, "How Nokia Helped Iran 'Persecute and Arrest' Dissidents," *Ars Technica*, March 4, 2010, https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2010/03/how-nokia-helped-iran-persecute-and-arrest-dissidents/.
[206] Hadi Sohrabi-Haghighat and Shohre Mansouri, "Where Is My Vote?" 27.

connections. Following the unrest in 2009, however, the Iranian state found ways to disable all VPN networks; at times of heightened turmoil, the government either shut down the Internet completely or brought it down to such a slow speed that it became virtually useless.[207] Sepideh recalled that the Internet was down for three days during the Green Movement, hindering people from even making phone calls or sending text messages. Despite this, the Iranian state will not shut down the most popular social media platforms because it reaps benefit from them. Khamenei has a Facebook profile, an Instagram Page (with 1.6 million followers) and a twitter account (with 452,800 followers), all of which are part of the Post-Network, Post-Reform media environment that has been created and maintained through Third Generation participation (i.e. liking, posting and sharing on social media).

Iranian Facebook Culture

The aforementioned "Postmodern Beggars" propelled Sooriland to its position of immense popularity among the Millenial Generation. In the interview with *Hamshahri* magazine, Rezaee discussed how he had thought about the subject of this particular animation for over a year. He stated, "This 'culture of liking' had been bothering me for some time. I felt that it had really become like begging. They always say, 'How many likes does it have?' (*Chand-ta "like" dare?)* or 'Click that like!' (*Bezan like-o*).[208] In this animation, Rezaee critiques the Iranian social media environment, in which "likes" have become commoditized. The animation's immense popularity and high level of circulation, however, exemplifies Jenkins's theory of spreadability. Third Generation Iranians deliberately shared and circulated the animation because it resonated with them. In doing so, they attributed value and new

[207] Siamdoust, Soundtrack of the Revolution, 217.
[208] *Hamshahri*, September 14, 2013.

meaning to the content. Rezaee's critique of Iranian Facebook culture has thus become a part of Iranian youth identity. As the animation's targeted audience, the Millenial Generation's participation in the spread and circulation of the animation reified the value of the content within contemporary Iranian culture. A close reading of the animation reveals how.

In Iran's bigger cities, similar to many other third world countries, it is quite common for mendicants to approach vehicles waiting in traffic to beg for money. In "Postmodern Beggars," Rezaee parodies this very familiar scenario, but instead of asking for money, the beggars ask for "likes." The animation begins with the Driver sitting behind the wheel, singing the pop tune, "Nastaran" to himself, when he is approached by a beggar who asks for a "like." The Driver responds that he does not have any "likes" to give, with the same annoyance often exhibited by Iranian drivers approached by beggars while waiting behind the traffic light. A number of beggars subsequently approach the Driver, all attempting to solicit likes for their respective Facebook pages. Each beggar represents an exaggerated aspect of Iranian Facebook culture that Rezaee deems worthy of derision. Beggar #2 claims to be the administrator of the "*Chosnāleh*[209] Page of Serīshtī" and flashes a photograph of an Iranian artist in her underwear. This character epitomizes a belief that Iranian Facebook users are attracted to spectacle. Beggar #3 approaches the car and introduces himself as a representative from the "Bald People Prohibited" page. He says, "The boys should leave comments and the girls should like so that we can see who is more numerous. Then, both genders should share so that our group's membership increases and a greater number of people can make use of the educational information that we offer. Now, will you like or will you comment?"[210] This character ridicules the Facebook protocol that had

[209] *Chosnaleh* is a colloquial Persian term meaning extreme and disingenuous whining, especially with the aim of seeking undue attention.
[210] Rezaee, "Gedāyān-e Post Modern," *Sooriland*, https://www.facebook.com/SooriLand/videos/10151526699080759/, August 6, 2013.

developed among Iranian Facebook users of including a stipulation regarding the actions that must be taken by each gender. The Driver agitatedly waves the beggar away and says, "Neither, I'm not interested." Beggar #4 says, "I have a beautiful sentence: A person can be missing a leg, as long as he's not a grasshopper-eater."[211] The Driver angrily retorts, "Get lost, racist!" and rolls up his window, just as the Beggar protests, "No, but we had the first human rights charter!"[212] This exchange not only mocks the racism that is still prominent in today's Iran, but also the overzealous patriotism that appears in Iranian social networking culture. A "grasshopper-eater" is a derogatory term for an Arab in today's colloquial Persian.[213] Beggar #5 presents a picture (of Zinedine Zidane) and says, "This child suffers from Cholera. Every night his father rapes him and every morning, his mother pours acid down his throat. This child will die within two weeks. I mean that I really want you guys to break the record of likes for this one!"[214] The Driver responds with annoyance, "What like? What part of this situation deserves a like?!"[215] The Beggar answers, "No, each like is actually a *dis*like."[216] The Driver gets into an altercation with the Beggar, arguing that a "like" does not convey aversion and that "liking" a disdainful situation is counterintuitive, while the Beggar insists that a "like" actually indicates a "dislike."

Frustrated with all of the beggars, the Driver rolls up his window and angrily declares them all to be crazy. A beggar suddenly appears in his backseat and tells the Driver to type the number "37" so that the light will turn green. This character mocks the chain letter-type status

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[211] Ibid.
[212] Ibid.
[213] In *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society* (2003), Ghassan Hage explains that a state's inability to engender hope in the nation installs a "paranoid nationalism" in the people, which condemn other marginalized groups for the social exclusion that they experience. For this reason, the progress of Iranian nationalism is typically expressed through prevalent anti-Arab sentiments, which essentially attributes all of Iran's current problems on the Arab invasion that brought Islam to Iran and took place over fourteen hundred years ago.
[214] Rezaee, "Gedāyān-e Post Modern," *Sooriland*.
[215] Ibid.
[216] Ibid.

updates that suddenly became rampant on Facebook in 2013. The Driver, fed up with the beggars, yells outs, "You're all driving me crazy!" opens his car door and runs out into traffic. He is chased by all of the "beggars," who continue to solicit likes from him, is hit by a car and dies. One of the beggars says, "Oh no, poor thing deactivated! Let's leave," and the beggars disperse.[217]

The Postmodern Beggars equate death with Facebook deactivation, but even when the Driver is dead, he has no peace. The representatives from both Heaven and Hell continue to pester the Driver for likes, implying that there is no escape from the absurdity of Facebook "liking" culture. The animation ends with a eulogy for the "like-deprived" souls of Iran. Rezaee further explained his view on the liking culture that has emerged in Iran. In his interview with *Hamshahri*, he stated:

> This "like" is a worthless click. But from the psychological perspective, a person believes that he receives validation. He thinks to himself that within one hour, five hundred people have liked his post, which means that five hundred people have paid attention to him.[218]

Due to the immense popularity of this particular animation, and drawing on Jenkins's theory of spreadibility, we can conjecture that this cartoon resonated deeply with the Iranian Millenial Generation because it conveys a criticism of the demographic that the audience itself acknowledges.

Arjun Appadurai describes social networking sites as technologies for imagination, which function to create communities of sentiment or groups that "imagine" and feel things together.[219] The Facebook culture that has evolved in Iran certainly correlates with Appadurai's assertion, as the action of "liking" allows Facebook users to feel camaraderie with a larger community. By

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[217] Ibid.
[218] *Hamshahri*, September 14, 2013.
[219] Rezaee, "Gedāyān-e Post Modern," *Sooriland*.

engaging in the same action ("liking"), Facebook users voice similar inclinations and sympathies, thus creating an imagined community of shared sentiment. "Postmodern Beggars" demonstrates how Appadurai's claim manifests in contemporary Iran. Indeed, Iranian Facebook users create and join imagined communities of shared sentiment, but these communities are often racist, chauvinist, voyeuristic, vulgar and often founded on inane ideas. Hamrah expressed exasperation with the "liking" culture that has developed among his generation. He stated:

> There really are some people who are actually after likes. Like the guy, as soon as he wakes up, thinks about how many followers he has on Instagram. Likes are bought and sold, I've heard. Because you know, in Tehran, and big cities, but especially in Tehran, a generation has come into existence that is brainless. I don't like to generalize, but this has happened. They are brainless. All of their values are based on appearance. The boys, they all go to the gym, have six-packs, biceps, etc. They all have fake tans and lips like this (he pouts) … and these are the guys! They inject fillers into their cheeks. Their teeth are all veneers. And all of them look the same. The girls, on the other hand, all of them get breast augmentations and inject their cheeks and lips with fillers. Their makeup is all the same. Their hairstyles are all the same. Even the way they talk is all the same. Everyone is the same. It's like they've been cloned. These people, they're brainless, and they get along with one another. They "like" each other. In their own world, they lead very normal lives.

Hamrah's comment demonstrates how the acting of "liking" has not only become commoditized, but has also become the means of value production within Iranian Millenial culture. Trends within this demographic are validated through likes and shares. Jenkins observes that as people circulate texts more broadly, they also make assessments of the value of these texts as a resource for social exchange.[220] People appraise the content that they encounter based on their own personal standard; they share material in conformance with its anticipated value within their social circle.[221] Jenkins reminds us that the simple act of "liking" (a status, post, picture) determines what material gets spread and by extension, is a significant step in the production of

[220] Jenkins et. all, *Spreadable Media*, 95.
[221] Ibid., 199.

culture. Hamrah's quote demonstrates how Iranians reify their culture through the act of "liking" representations of it on social media.

Jenkins contends that social media has facilitated audience behaviors that were once considered niche or fringe to become commonplace and mainstream.[222] An example of this and the commodification of likes can be witnessed in Sooriland's "The Truthful Shepherd," which was published on Facebook on February 19, 2014.[223] This parody of Aesop's fable, "The Boy Who Cried Wolf," again mocks Iranian social media culture, but its circulation points to the actual sense of disillusionment that pervades the Millenial Generation. As discussed earlier, the Green Movement provided the stage for a proliferation of activism and citizen journalism, as Iranians (primarily of the Millenial Generation) rushed to take photographs and upload them onto social media sites. They did so, not only to expose the tyranny of the Iranian state, but also to maintain the momentum of the movement. Scenes of state-sanctioned repression and violence were filmed and/or photographed and uploaded onto Twitter, YouTube and Facebook. As Jenkins observes, a media text often enjoys a high degree of spreadability because it portrays a controversy that a community cares about at a particular instance. The most famous example of this was the aforementioned capture of Neda Agha Soltan's death. The video of Neda's death spread because it so aptly articulated the sentiment of Millenial Iranians at the height of Green Movement turmoil. It became the rallying cry for this demographic because it conveyed the brutality of the Iranian state, and the Millenial Generation's reason for protesting, within a matter of seconds. As Jenkins observes, content spreads when it articulates a community's stance on an issue at a precise time, better than what community members believe they themselves can convey.

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[222] Ibid., 148.
[223] Rezaee, "Chūpān-e Rāstgū," *Sooriland*, https://www.facebook.com/SooriLand/videos/717591864938616/, February 19, 2014.

In this animation, however, Rezaee echoes the main critique of slacktivism, depicting scenarios in which the videoing/photographing of an incident does little to help the victim/the cause, and is done so only for the sake of posting a picture that will yield the maximum number of "likes." In regards to this matter, Rezaee asserts that Iranian social media users are not even concerned with providing original content and are completely comfortable "stealing" and "sharing" someone else's status or picture. He says, "That is not even important to them. What is important to them is the number of likes. Even unethical acts such as putting up personal pictures are considered permissible as long as they receive likes."[224] A close reading of "The Truthful Shepherd" points to the evolution of the Iranian social media environment post Green Movement, in which likes became commoditized.

In this animation, the townspeople gather to supposedly come to the aid of the Shepherd crying "wolf." But instead of actually helping the Shepherd under attack, the townspeople take photographs of the spectacle. In the following scene, the townspeople upload and post pictures of the maimed Shepherd onto Facebook. Rezaee's first comedic jab comes in the form of the names of the townspeople. Similar to "Myths of Resistance" in which the main character/supposed activist was called "Khafan Pesar" (Awesome Boy), the names of the townspeople in the "Truthful Shepherd" are meant to ridicule the vapidity of this social-media savvy generation. The first name mentioned, Gholam Gherti, translates as "Gholam the Dandy." Gholam Gherti's picture post of the Shepherd being attacked by the wolf and its caption, "Who should be held accountable?" mocks Iranian Facebook activism, implying a lack of action on the part of Gholam Gherti and the demographic he represents. Hassan Ghashang, whose name translates as "Pretty Hassan," furthers this critique by mocking the Green Movement rallying cry, "Natarsīn! Natarsīn! Mā hame bā ham hastīm!" (Do not fear! Do not fear! We are all

[224] *Hamshahri*, September 14, 2013.

together) by posting a photo of the wolf attacking the Shepherd with the caption, "Do not fear, man! We are all behind you!" Hākhān Mobārez-e Vatan[225] ridicules those Facebook "activists" that use Facebook/social media as a platform to insult the hierarchical establishment. His alias "Defender of the Nation" is also a jab at overzealously nationalist Iranians. Khadkhodā Mavālpūr's picture of the bare-bottomed Shepherd represents not only those Facebook users who share photos out of context, but also those who show little or no empathy for the situation pictured in the photo, and instead only seek "likes."

In the final scene of the animation, Rezaee depicts the immoral means and lengths to which Iranians will supposedly go in order to take the ultimate, like-inspiring picture. In this scene, the Shepherd is shown as an invalid beggar who holds up a bear mask in order to hide his identity and avoid allowing people the opportunity to take his picture in such a pitiful state. A passerby tricks the Shepherd into dropping his mask, by offering him money. He quickly snaps a photograph in the brief moment that the Shepherd brings his hand down to collect the alms. The Shepherd responds, "May your aunt get raped by an impotent bear! Don't take pictures! Please, don't take pictures! Give me that camera! Let me see it! Wait! I have dignity!"[226] The Shepherd then knuckle-walks after the photographer and the narrator states, "And so it was."[227] The Shepherd attempts to chase down the insolent passerby, but it is comically obvious that he will not succeed. The Devil's final commentary at the end of the animation, that it would have boded better for the shepherd had he lied, as in the original story, reiterates the sense of disillusionment that pervades Iranian society. Indeed, had the shepherd lied, as in the original fable, perhaps he would not be in such a miserable condition. Instead, despite his sincere plea for help, the Shepherd's hardship only serves as fodder for a spectacle-hungry public.

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[225] "Defender of the Nation"
[226] Rezaee, "Chūpān-e Rāstgū," *Sooriland*.
[227] Ibid.

Vashti discussed how the animation reflected her generation's propensity for gathering and capturing spectacle on photo or film, with the hope of snapping a "like-worthy" shot. She referred to the Plasco Building fire, which occurred in Tehran, on January 19, 2017, stating:

> I agree that in Iran they have really *let the stink out*[228] for taking pictures. You can see it in the events like the terrorist attack[229] that took place, or when Plasco burned down. A lot of people gathered just to take pictures, despite the fact that it was dangerous. I haven't seen this anywhere else. Like the fire in London. I didn't see people gather like this to take pictures or film, for example. Or it's common in Iran that when there is a fight, people will gather and take pictures and videos. From what I've seen in Iran, this happens a lot.

Vashti's comment demonstrates the preponderance of the "like" and more broadly, social media, as a significant force shaping contemporary Iranian culture. Richard Senett discusses the power of the "like" using an economic framework. He observes that historically, craftsmen were not only monetarily compensated for their work, but reaped intangible rewards such as recognition, appreciation, status, satisfaction and pride in a job well done.[230] For this reason Sennett contends that various and multiple networks shape cultural production within a commercial economy, which cannot be reduced to mere economic rewards. Thus, within peer and open exchange, status, prestige, esteem and relationship building replace remuneration as the primary force behind cultural production and social transaction. "Likes" represent these alternative motives. Saba's comment suggests that Iranian culture is prone to abide by Sennett's model.

While Rezaee satirizes the Millenial Generation's post-Green Movement fixation with capturing spectacles to post on social media, the circulation of this animation reifies the satirical critique that it offers. It effectively became a metaphor for the disenchantment of young Iranians who had believed in the promise of change in Iranian society and had advocated for it within the theoretic framework of the *velāyat-e faqīh*. They were not only disappointed with the failure of

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[228] A colloquial expression that means

[229] The June 7, 2017 ISIS attack on Iran's parliament building and the tomb of Khomeini.

[230] Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Have: Yale University Press, 2008).

the Reform Movement, but were then subjected to the Ahmadinejad administration. Their hopes dashed, they came to realize that their utopian religious democracy was in fact an unattainable goal. This disillusionment not only manifested in an apathetic complacency regarding the political state of the country, it also nurtured a new social media environment defined by the commodification of "likes" and abetted the burgeoning of a commodity culture.

The Rich Kids of Tehran

As Jenkins observes, commodity culture emphasizes personal expressions of freedom, upward social mobility, escape from constraint and the enabling of new possibilities.[231] Within this commodity culture, brands are sustained by aspiration; they are assigned values based on the fantasies they inspire, which depend on whether one can afford to buy them.[232] The social media environment that evolved during the Ahmadinejad era served to enhance a commodity-driven culture among Millenial Iranians, which in turn is reflected in the prominence of class identity in today's Iran.

A neoliberal mentality has become prevalent in contemporary Iran, as Millenial Iranian are quick to tell you that *everything* is available in Iran, one just needs to have the money for it. While Khosravi asserts that Iranian youth culture is dictated by generation rather than class, Olszewska observes that the wants and desires of upper-class Iranian youth are not the same as that of lower-class Iranian youth. Wealthy Millenial Iranians dictate many of the prevalent trends of today's Iranian youth culture, as they are not restricted by monetary limitations. Meanwhile, many young Iranians from the lower economic echelons aspire to partake in the socio-cultural trends set by the wealthy. Class-consciousness is thus expressed through consumerism.

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[231] Jenkins et al., *Spreadable Media*, 203.
[232] Ibid., 103.

On September 1, 2014, Sooriland published an animation entitled "ALS?!"[233] The animation begins with a male figure with "six-pack" abs in a green speedo, standing next to a pool, a grand piano and a luxury SUV, holding a red bucket. He states, "I am currently in my private villa, along with my SUV with a sunroof, royal grand piano and my dad's pool. I will participate in the ice bucket challenge and I challenge Kamran, Nooshin and Fereshteh to participate."[234] A voice (presumably of the cameraman) says, "My boy, you haven't even mentioned the actual matter at hand!"[235] The six-packed speedo character asks, "What is the actual matter?" The voice responds, "ALS?!" The boy then responds, "Ah-ha! 23/M/Tehran … and I'm recently single!" He pours the ice water on his head, screams out "Vay! Vaaayyy! Vaaaaayyyyy!" in an exaggeratedly effeminate way, and dives into the pool, thus ending the animation.[236]

In this media text, Rezaee criticizes the Tehran elite and the popularity of the viral ALS challenge among this demographic. The green speedo-wearing participant of the challenge is identifiable as a member of the upper class, due to his accouterments (private villa, SUV with sunroof, royal grand piano and his father's swimming pool). When asked about the actual matter at hand, ALS, the participant responds in such a way that it is obvious he has no idea about the disease or the campaign to raise money and awareness for it. He mistakes ALS for A/S/L, which stands for "age/sex/location," a commonly used acronym in Internet chat rooms. In this animation, Rezaee mocks the ignorance of the upper-class elite that engaged in the ice bucket

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[233] This refers to the ALS ice bucket challenge. The ALS ice bucket challenge involves the dumping of ice water onto one's head in order to promote awareness of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) or what is known in the United States as Lou Gehrig's disease. The ice bucket challenge went viral on social media during July and August of 2014. The challenge encouraged nominated participants to be filmed while pouring a bucket of ice water on their heads and nominating others to similarly perform the challenge. Nominated participants were to either comply within twenty-four hours or forfeit by making a charitable financial donation.

[234] Rezaee, "A L S ?!" *Sooriland*, https://www.facebook.com/SooriLand/videos/815933785104423/, September, 1, 2014.

[235] Ibid.

[236] Ibid.

challenge simply because it was trendy and not because they had any idea about what they were supporting. Once the green-speedo character pours the ice water on his head, he lets out a very effeminate yell. In this way, Rezaee criticizes the rich kids of Iran, pointing out the sheep-like tendency of this group, and while depicting the demographic as foppish and oblivious to any kind of actual hardship.

The immense popularity of this cartoon indicates that Iranian Millenials can either relate to or agree with Rezaee's portrayals of class discrepancies, while its circulation reified his criticism. Less than two weeks after the publication of this animation, a new Instagram page entitled "The Rich Kids of Tehran" (RKOT) made its debut. RKOT launched on September 13, 2014; within three weeks, the account had attracted almost one hundred thousand followers. Modeled after the Rich Kids of Instagram page, RKOT showcased the obscenely opulent lifestyle of the Tehran elite, by publishing photographs of mansions, expensive sports cars, private jets, designer watches, poolside lounging, scantily-clad women partying and the consumption of an exorbitant amount of alcohol. This garish representation of the privileged Iranian elite went viral. It was featured on many major Western media outlets, before the Iranian government shut it down for its "vulgar" content on October 9, 2014.[237] The page was unblocked less than a week later with a disclaimer that the pictures of alcohol and women in bikinis were actually taken by Tehranis living outside of Iran and that "all the young people featured in this account respect the government rules."[238] Despite appeasement of the Islamic regime's censure, the exhibition of the Tehrani elite lifestyle continues to have a particular allure

[237] "Iran Blocks Instagram Account of 'Rich Kids' Showing Off Wealth in Tehran," *The Guardian*, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/09/iran-blocks-instagram-richkidsoftehran-young-elite, October 9, 2014.
[238] Ibid.

among Iranians, as the RKOT Instagram page (which is now private) has expanded to both Twitter and Snapchat, and is active in all three realms of social media.

Pooneh believed that the behavior ridiculed by Rezaee in the ALS animation is also prevalent among the middle class. Vashti, however, disagreed and was adamant that this was more a characteristic of The Rich Kids of Tehran, or the upper-class elite. She countered Pooneh's claim, retorting, "How many middle class homes have a pool in Iran?!" Pooneh responded that it only requires one person "from above" to have a pool and invite the rest. Her comment suggests the clout that wealthier Iranians boast among the Millenial Generation. The ardent fervor for upward socio-economic mobility that Millenial Iranians are believed to harbor actually inspires critical reflection on the role of class within today's Iranian society by the generation's own members. Hamrah expressed a such a sentiment, stating:

> In all the other countries that I've been to, if someone says, "I don't have a job; all I do is sleep all day, go to the gym and tan," or "I wear make up and this is how I spend my time and my daddy buys me a new car," no one likes this person. They'll say that the guy is leeching off his dad. But in Iran, it has become something *bā-hāl* (cool). It's of value. It's a social value. The guy has a rich father and he's totally *alāf* (shiftless). It's like this in all of the cities in Iran. It has a direct relationship with money. The guy who is rich in Ahvaz lives the same way … does the same things … has the same pastimes and leisure activities.

Hamrah's comment suggests that he perceives his generation to understand indolence as an indication of wealth and thus exhibits a tendency to glorify it. As he states, it is "cool" to be idle because it is perceived that the person is financially able to be so.

Based on the criticism conveyed in Sooriland's satire and the accounts of my informants, I posit that class identity plays a definitive role, not only in Iran's contemporary youth culture, but also in the greater scheme of Iranian society. Today's Iran reflects the amalgamation of the Islamic Republic's sustained neoliberal economic policies, the sociopolitical disenchantment of the Millenial Generation and a Post-Network media environment that has encouraged the

propagation of a commodity culture. The combination of these circumstances has ultimately resulted in a society dictated through class politics. The vital role that social media has played in the emergence of this commodity culture and the reification of class identity as a prominent feature of Iranian society has been facilitated by the Post-Network, Post-Reform media agnosticism boasted by Iran's Millenials, rendering this demoraphic a remarkably tech-savvy generation.

Regarding the New Generation: Tech-Savvy Apathy

As Thomas Friedman observes, the development of the Internet browser has effectively expanded the reach of transnational capitalism, by enabling goods and content to move across national borders more fluidly. Jenkins draws on Friedman to assert that while spreadable media increases the power of people to shape their media environment, there can be no expectation of a specific outcome. He contends that the evolution of media platforms and content creation is an inescapable consequence of technological development. The kind of culture that people produce and spread through these technologies does not follow a pre-determined course. In the case of Iran, increased participation in the post-Green Movement social media environment fostered the growth of a commodity-driven culture, which in turn has played a significant role in molding and shaping Iran's Millenial Generation. Sooriland's "Regarding the New Generation" series demonstrates how Millenial Iranians criticize the sense of complacent apathy that Internet technology and social media has supposedly promoted among their generation, which coupled with the prevalence of commodity culture, has initiated a breakdown of the traditional patriarchal structures of Iranian culture and society.

On April 14, 2015 Sooriland published "Father's Last Words." A close reading of this animation reveals how Millenial Iranians formulate spreadable content that will ensure the highest degree of circulation. The animation begins with a father sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall with a blanket over his legs, in the traditional Iranian fashion. His three sons (all dressed in yellow shirts, wearing round framed glasses, sporting clean-shaven faces and cropped hair cuts) are all holding their cellphones with selfie sticks and sitting in a row. There is a rug in the center of the room and a samovar in the corner between the boys and their father. The father says, "Someone bring me a twig, stick, something … I want to give you my last piece of advice!"[239] The boys hold out their selfie sticks. The father continues, "Well done. Now, I want each of you to break your stick in half!"[240] The son closest to the father turns to his brother and says, "He's starting to become delirious," while the last one in the row turns to the others and says, "He's completely lost it."[241] The father yells out, "Well, what are you doing?! Break your sticks!"[242] At this point one of the sons comes over and sits next to his father. He tells his father to smile and takes a selfie with his phone (that is mounted on the selfie stick) and says, "Me and my father, all of a sudden (*yehoi*)."[243] Another son comes over to their father and tells him not to move, while his brother also smiles for the camera and says, "Our last picture with Dad at the end of his life."[244] The son who took the photograph walks away and the father dies. The son still standing by his father says, "Father, why have you died?!"[245] He then kneels down next to his dead father, takes a photograph (with his selfie stick) and says, "The first picture of our

[239] Rezaee, "Dar bāb-e nasl-e no: ākharīn sohbathāye pedar," *Sooriland*, https://www.facebook.com/SooriLand/videos/939510939413373/, April 14, 2015.
[240] Ibid.
[241] Ibid.
[242] Ibid.
[243] Ibid.
[244] Ibid.
[245] Ibid.

dearly departed and I."[246] He then says, "Location: Zafarānīeh. Hashtag mourning. Hashtag sadness. Hashtag we are now orphans."[247]

Instead of humoring their dying father, the boys are more concerned with the spreadability of their Instagram posts. The first son to take a picture of himself and his father captions the photograph, "Me and my father all of a sudden (*yehoī*)."[248] In 2015, the "*yehoī*"/"all of a sudden" hashtag rendered content extremely spreadable among Iranian social media users. The utilization of this particular hashtag evokes a sense of levity and amusement. Originally the hashtag was used to describe or tag an instantaneous moment, but its popularity soon gave way to more creative interpretations and uses. It began to be used with inanimate objects and in certain scenarios in which an impromptu description was absurd and therefore comical. By depicting a character that utilizes the "all of a sudden" hashtag for a picture with his dying father, Rezaee mocks the aloofness of the Millenial Generation. The second son to take a photograph with his father tells his dying father to smile for the camera, and captions the photograph, "Our last photo with Dad at the end of his dying days." The most critical (and comical) moment in this animation is when the last son takes a photograph of their dead father. He quickly declares the picture as the *first* of the dearly departed, and ensures further spreadability by tagging his location and adding hashtags. Zafaranie is one the richest neighborhoods in Tehran. Its inclusion demonstrates how socio-economic class is a significant factor in the spreadability of a particular cultural text.

Rezaee's satire reflects Millenial criticisms of the Instagram culture that has evolved in Iran's current media environment. The inclusion of the hashtags #mourning and #saddness, when there are no actual displays of either, specifically serves to increase the post's

[246] Ibid.
[247] Ibid.
[248] Ibid.

spreadability. Greater spreadability ensures higher circulation, which translates to cultural value. As the text is shared among Millenial Iranians, the hashtags and location pin reify the cultural capital of the Tehrani upper class elite. While the animation mocks the culture that currently characterizes Iran's media environment, its circulation among the very audience that it mocks demonstrates how content accrues value in the Iranian media environment. That death is trivialized and revamped as just another Instagram post, with a location and hashtags specifically tailored to garner likes and followers, reiterates the preponderance of commodity culture among the Millenial Generation of Iran.

This animation also indicates the breakdown of the patriarchal structures that are so essential to upholding the theocratic framework of the Islamic Republic. A harsh patriarchal attitude prevails in contemporary Iranian society that glorifies the father figure and his superiority over his children. Iranian civil law legitimizes a father's complete authority over his child, by endorsing physical punishment, even if it results in the death of the child.[249] Despite this, Rezaae's cartoon demonstrates that a shift in hierarchal power between fathers and sons has taken place in contemporary Iran. Siamdoust observes that the Islamic Republic uses grief to perform and assert its identity as a tool of subjugation. By politically enforcing a culture of grief, particularly as a mode of discipline and authority, the state reifies the paternalistic relationship it has with its subjects.[250] By mocking certain aspects of this culture of grief through trivializing it to mere hashtags, Rezaee posits that Iranian Millenials are chipping away at the patriarchal foundations of the Islamic State. The circulation of this animation, then, not only contributes to the shaping of Iran's media environment, but it also generates meaning; it

[249] Ahmad Fathi Bahnassi, "Criminal Responsibility in Islamic Law" in *The Islamic Criminal Justice System*, ed. Cherif Bassiouni (New York: Oceana, 1982), 183.
[250] Siamdoust, *Soundtrack of the Revolution*, 13.

actualizes Rezaee's satire into a legitimate collective self-criticism of Iran's Millenial Generation.

The Islamic Republic's social order is based on Islamic family ethics and values, which advocate a patriarchal family structure. In this structure, the father protects and rules over his household. The Sooriland animation described and analyzed in this section indicates a shift in the Iranian family structure, in which the patriarch is losing his absolute control of the family. The spreadability of the animation supports this notion, which is further bolstered by reports from my informants regarding their own family structures and the others that they have witnessed.

Conclusion

Scholars of social movements in modern Iran have lauded the revolutionary power of new media technologies, from the print press during the Constitutional Revolution, to cassette tapes in the Islamic Revolution to social media in the Green Movement. In accordance with the resistance trend that dominates Iranian studies, new media technologies are championed as potential tools of democratization. It is important, however, to look beyond media technology's role in resistance movements, as new platforms create apertures for social, culture, economic, legal and political changes. Social media is therefore significant, not just because it is the newest form of media technology to be utilized in the propagation of social movements, but also because it provides a new platform for the creation of cultural value and meaning. In the realm of cultural studies, media consumption is an act of meaning production. Content that is passed along accrues value within a social network. Humans rarely engage in meaningless activities; thus, when people circulate content, they do so with purpose. As media texts are passed along,

they generate both value and worth. Material spreads when it most powerfully speaks to the desires and anxieties of a particular community. In this chapter, Sooriland animations serve as an example of spreadable media in the context of contemporary Iran. Sooriland's breakthrough piece, "Postmodern Beggars" was shared almost as many times as it was liked when it first debuted on Facebook in 2013, rendering it an extremely spreadable media text, with a high rate of circulation. After the publication of "Postmodern Beggars," Sooriland became intensely popular among Iranian Millenials, particularly due to the animation's relatable content. As previously mentioned, successful content creators are able to endear themselves to their audience by evoking a sense of shared experience. Sooriland was and continues to be popular among young Iranians because it cleverly conveys many of the observations and criticisms that Millenial Iranians have about themselves, their culture and their society. Rezaee's animations not only reveal the prevalence of a commodity-driven culture among Iran's Millenial Generation, but their spread and circulation demonstrate the prominence of class politics in Iran, which became blatantly noticeable during the Ahmadinejad administration. As Jenkins observed, the shift across media industries from networked communication to engagement-based models rendered visible the work of active audiences in creating cultural value. Thus the prominence of class identity within Millenial Iranian society has in large part been facilitated by the adaptation of Post-Network media practices. At the same time, Millenial Iranians' media agnosticism has rendered the generation preponderant in Post-Network Iran, and has notably contributed to the erosion of the patriarchal pillars that have historically upheld Iranian society; this historical shift suggests the transformation of Iran's dominant culture from a tradition-bound patriarchy to a consumer-driven, class-based filiarchy. Millenial Iran has thus emerged as a society

characterized by a prevalent commodity culture and defined by the prominence of class identities, the implications of which will be examined in the following chapter.

Trending in Tehran: Commodity Culture and Class Identity

My informants unanimously agree that more wealth translates as more options for leisure activity in today's Iran. If youthfulness is defined as the pursuance of fun, and fun is a variable of wealth in contemporary Iranian society, then socioeconomic class plays a significant role in the determination of cultural capital among Iranian Millenials. In Iran's highly centralized geo-social structure, the "norm" is often dictated by the trends that emerge out of the capital, Tehran. Affluent young Tehranis, therefore, dictate many of the trends and fashions that prevail among contemporary Iranian youth. These trends are then propagated through the Post-Network media practices of the Millenial Generation.

The advent of Post-Network technologies, such as social media and handheld Internet devices, has unleashed an unprecedented wave of narcissism throughout the urban world. Christopher Lasch and Hans Blumenberg have described the "celebration of self" and "self assertion" as the primary features of modernity.[251] However, I contend that in Iran, this focus on the self is a consequence of the continued imposition of social strictures on a disillusioned youth population, facilitated through the advent and adaptation of Post-Network technologies. Following the trauma of the Post-Reform Era, the Green Movement and the Ahmadinejad administration, the Iranian Millenial Generation experienced a sociopolitical disenchantment that resulted in a shift of attention inward. The self became understood as the arena in which young Iranians could exert the greatest degree of control. At the same time, the neoliberalism that has defined Iran's economy since the Reconstruction Era, in tandem with the embrace of Post-

[251] Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, (Cambrdige: Mass.: MIT press, 1983 [1966]). Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in the Age of Diminishing Expectations*, (New York: Warner Books, 1983).

Network practices by Iran's Millenial Generation, has resulted in the emergence and prevalence of a commodity culture.

Throughout this chapter I examine the commodity culture of Post-Reform, Post-Network Iran, by exploring the various self-focused behaviors that it has engendered among Iran's Millenial Generation. I apply Arjun Appadurai's understanding of commodities, commoditization and fashion to examine the dimensions of this commodity culture as it has materialized in contemporary Iranian society. Millenial Iran's commodity culture manifests as fashion, leisure activities, body modification, courtship rituals and sexuality, which I explore in that order, following a path that begins on the "outside," examining prevalent practices exhibited by Iranian youth in public, to the "inside" where the most intimate behaviors take place. My findings reveal that these trends serve to reify and perpetuate class identity as the definitive feature of Millenial Iran. In this context, trends function as markers of socioeconomic class, which Iranians use as a type of class currency to signify the class group with which they identify or aspire to. Many of these trends draw inspiration from the "West" or *kharej*, which in today's Iran refers to an imagined concept that embodies what Iranians *perceive* to be western, combined with the deeply rooted traditions of the region. The result of this is a unique youth culture, dictated by class identity and perpetuated by the Post-Network media practices that have prevailed in Millenial Iran.

Fashionably Rich Famous Kids

Arjun Appadurai notes that "fashion" is created through the control and restriction of commodities.[252] In *The Social Life of Things* Appadurai proposes a shift in perspective on the

[252] Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: commodities and the politics of value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 25.

circulation of commodities. He argues that if economic exchange creates value and value is embodied in the commodities that are exchanged, then we should focus on the actual things being exchanged rather than the forms and functions of the transfer. Consumption, Appadurai contends, is a social, relational and active process.[253] Fashion is a derivative of consumption; it is the rapidly changing criteria of "appropriateness" within a given society, which regulates the consumption demands of its adherents.[254] According to Jean Baudrillard, fashion is the cultural medium through which objects move.[255]

Werner Sombart was the first to theorize how the notion of romantic love and the demand for luxury goods led to the expansion of the capitalist system throughout the Western world.[256] He contended that notions of romantic love, companionate marriage and the refinement of sexual rituals in Europe, from 1300-1800, gave way to a political economy of courtship, driven by the nouveau riche, aristocracy and court's demand for luxury commodities. This, in turn, inspired the expansion of trade, industry and finance capital, resulting in the birth of modern capitalism, and culminating in the preponderance of fashion as a social mechanism. Jean Baudrillard and Pierre Bourdieu applied Sombart's theory to demonstrate how the establishments that dictate fashion and "good taste" (appropriateness) effectively limit social mobility and create a situation in which social rank is determined by elite experts who reside at the upper echelons of society.[257] Sombart's conclusions regarding demand, the politics of fashion and the propelling power of sexuality as an economic force, as well as his ratiocination of the relationship between luxury

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[253] Ibid., 31.
[254] Ibid., 32.
[255] Ibid., 46.
[256] Werner Sombart, *Luxury and Capitalism*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967).
[257] Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis, Missouri: Telos Press, 1981). Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).

and necessity, not only resonate in the works of Western cultural theorists, such as Baudrillard and Bourdieu, but may also be applied to this study of Post-Network Millenial culture in Iran.

The function of commodities within prestige economies in the modern world are preserved and perpetuated through a criterion of authenticity. Drawing on the works of Baudrillard and Bourdieu, which focused on the political economy of taste as it manifested in modern day France, Appadurai notes that the notion of authenticity is driven by a complex collaboration and competition between experts and consumers.[258] Authenticity is guaranteed through a system of expertise, credentialism and intellectual aestheticism, which according to Bourdieu are the hallmarks of a complex capitalistic society, and have ultimately resulted in the commoditization of knowledge about commodities. As Appadurai observes, commodities within a fashion system represent intricate social forms, as well as a bilateral distribution of knowledge. He asserts that the knowledge required to produce primary commodities (necessities) tends to be standardized, while that which is required for the production of secondary commodities (luxury items) is much more arbitrary, as it is typically shaped by individual taste, judgment and experience.[259] In addition to the [technical, social, aesthetic, etc.] knowledge that is required to produce a commodity, Appadurai contends that there is also a knowledge required for the appropriate consumption of the commodity.[260] This model is apparent in Khosravi's study of Third Generation culture, in which he observes that knowledge about the latest fashions and the "correct way" to consume is spread through personal networks. He contends that the trendsetters in Tehran boast a particular attitude that their peers recognize as "modern," which distinguishes

[258] Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, 45.
[259] Ibid., 42.
[260] Ibid., 41.

them from traditionally minded Iranians and affords them with a distinctive subcultural capital. One must know the right people in order to fall into the category of "cool" Tehrani, he asserts.[261]

I observed this phenomenon in the context of Iranian Millenial culture through the concept of the *bache marūf* or the "Famous Kid." Hamrah explained:

> There's a term, *bache marūf* (Famous Kid), in Tehran. Like the guy is the Famous Kid of his neighborhood. Sa'ādatābād or Eckbātān or wherever; everyone knows him. I used to live in Eckbātān, where my cousin, Saeed, was the *bache marūf*. Then, gradually, he became the *bache marūf* of Tehran. So whatever he wears, a series of people will imitate him. Then you see it becomes a trend.

Hamrah described how the Famous Kid of each neighborhood makes a round at the local shopping center once a week. His audience is a series of Millenial Iranians who do not enjoy the same level of popularity, but are at the shopping center and take note of what the Famous Kid is wearing and replicate it. In addition to setting fashion trends, Famous Kids also make certain places popular, as Hamrah stated:

> Tehran has a series of *pātogh* (hangouts). In Vali Asr, there are these two towers. There are no cafes, no coffee shops, no restaurants. It's just a business center that closes down at night. But it is always crowded there. People from the ages of twenty to twenty-six/twenty-seven go walking there. They park their cars and go walk. They look at each other. They talk. They meet each other. Anyway, after a while the place becomes well known, and the Famous Kids stop going there. In Tehran we say *khaz*[262] …the *khaz* people all start coming and it becomes too crowded. The security forces notice the traffic there, and so they patrol it for a couple of weeks, deterring people from going there. Then, the following week, some random kabob shop becomes the *paātogh*, because one of the Famous Kids starts going there. They make a particular place a *pātogh*, and then everybody goes there. But it always changes. I've never seen a fixed place, like one place that is a hang out where all the cool kids go.

Much of Iranian vogue is based on the *perception* of being fashionable. This is a distinct characteristic of Iranian culture; a person is deemed modish, as long as they boast a few key insignia that attest to their fashion savvy. The following *Shūkhī Kardam* monologue enjoyed a high degree of circulation among Third Generation Iranians:

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[261] Khosravi, *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, 120.

[262] This word as the same connotation as the word "lame" in colloquial American English.

> To be fashionable, you don't have to follow every single fashion trend to a tee. Just a few indicators are enough to reach the apex of perfection. I mean there have been cases in which it has snowed and the guy, sitting on top of a *toyūp* (tube) has come down on a three-centimeter hill. Then he hits a stone and runs headfirst into a pine tree. Then he goes to Shemshack for half a day, rents ski clothes and gear, takes a picture, puts it on Facebook and captions it, "Once again, me and the snowy mountains that beckon me." Meaning, when you look at the picture, you think the guy was born with skis on, has spent a lifetime skiing the powdery snow of the Rocky Mountains and at the end of his life, they will bury him at the base of the Alps. *This* is called creativity![263]

This monologue not only mocks the notion of what it means to be "fashionable" among a particular class group, but it also indicates the significant role that social media plays in perpetuating the image of what it means to be a "cool" Iranian. While social media serves as a vehicle for people to project a perception of their perfect lives the world over, one assumes that due to the imposition of social restrictions in Iran, social media is a *necessary* component in the introduction, spread and sharing of trends. Hamrah, however, claims that his cousin, Saeed Kolooch, was famous even before the advent of social media; People recognized him from his rounds at the shopping center, he said. But social media has greatly abetted Saeed Kolooch's social status, as his Instagram account boasts nearly fifty thousand followers.

Saeed Kolooch, therefore, possesses what Pierre Bourdieu describes as "cultural capital."[264] Within the Iranian symbolic market, social and cultural goods have different degrees of honor and prestige. A *bache marūf* is one who boasts a higher degree of cultural capital than the people around him, which is what distinguishes him from his followers and demonstrates how culture is used as a form of currency for the expression of Millenial identity. While style is typically based on an individual's personal taste and preferences, some people hold greater power in dictating what is stylish and what is uncouth.[265] Echoing this notion, based on the

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[263] Mehran Modiri, "Mod," Episode 15, *Shūkhī Kardam*, http://www.iranproud.net/series/Shookhi-kardam/episodes/mod.
[264] Bourdieu, *Distinction*.
[265] Khosravi, *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, 71-72.

trends that prevail among Iranian youth, I contend that Famous Kids are among the most influential trendsetters in contemporary Iran.

Furthermore, certain types of behaviors and attitudes are deemed more fashionable in contemporary Iran than others. Khosravi argues that hierarchy in Iran is defined by practices that emphasize cultural distinctions as a means of maintaining social stratification. One of the most notable trends among Millenial Iranians is to boast a wealthy lifestyle. Hannah commented on how ostentatious displays of one's wealth is a trend that many contemporary Iranians emulate. She stated:

> Right now in Iran, it has become fashionable to have lavish parties for a child's first birthday or his first tooth falling out, that are as extravagant as wedding receptions. They reserve gardens for the events. All of this is *cheshm o ham cheshmi*.[266]

Hannah insisted that this was not just a case unique to her friends, and pointed to a number of such instances of these parties on her Instagram. She claimed that her generation justifies these types of lavish expenditures based on what they see their peers doing on social media; they emulate it so as to not fall behind, she said, and continued:

> Even though Iran is rife with financial and economic problems, no one is content and satisfied with what they have. People here (in the United States) try to have normal lives and just live well. But in Iran, it's all *berīz o bepāsh* (splurging). Like the kinds of parties that they have in Iran, I have never seen here!

Mostafa contended that the social restrictions imposed by the Islamic state on Iranian youth are the reason behind such ostentatious posturing. He stated, "It is because Iranian youth are unable to just go out however they want." He claimed that young Iranians post pictures of themselves as a means to show the world how they *actually* live and look like. "We aren't what you see on the streets," he said. But in addition to correcting the world's perception of contemporary Iran

[266] *Cheshm o ham cheshmi* roughly translates as "Keeping up with the Joneses," and refers to competitive emulation.

and Iranians, Mostafa mentioned that many (upper class) Iranians are also compelled by the desire to show off. He referred to his Instagram, stating:

> Notice how people take pictures in Iran. Like, if they're taking a video in their car, and they have a nice car, usually at the end of the film they make sure that the make and model of the car is visible in the shot. As if to say, "We are luxury." They want to show that they are "luxury."

My informants repeatedly referred to the word "luxury" while describing the prevalent trends among their demographic. They specifically used the English word "luxury," which has become part of contemporary Iran's vernacular. This propensity for luxury is a notable characteristic of Post-Network Iran, as it reoccurs throughout various manifestations of Iranian Millenial Culture.

Luxury Coffee Shops and Insufferable Behaviors:

Coffee has long been a part of Persian culture, predating even the development of the Western world. First cultivated in Ethiopia and Yemen, coffee quickly spread to the countries in closest proximity, making its way to Iran through the Ottoman Empire. It was first mentioned in sixteenth century Safavid medical treatises, as a beverage with medicinal properties, but soon after became the beverage of choice served at both royal and popular social settings. During the late sixteenth century, Safavid Iran witnessed the establishment and spread of coffee houses, both within the capital (Esfahan) and beyond, thus pointing to the historical centrality of coffee within the Iranian public sphere.[267] However, the demise of the Safavid Empire in the early

[267] The coffeehouse was among the first public places to emerge in Iran, and provided a welcomed compromise between the austerity of the mosque and the debauchery of the tavern. They served as a place for people to socialize and exchange news and gossip, and provided a refuge for poets, artists and Sufi dervishes who would otherwise be harassed by local authorities. Early Safavid coffeehouses also became spaces for homoerotic interaction between servers and clientele, in which the young boys who made music and danced suggestively while serving coffee, were also available for sex with customers. By the reign of Shah Abbas II, religious authorities espousing Shi'i orthodoxy became prominent and resulted in the issuing of a ban on coffeehouses from permitting entrance to unaccompanied minors. This ban effectively put an end to the debaucherous revelry that had come to characterize Safavid coffeehouses, and they effectively became "sanitized" to spaces where Iranians would gather to play board games, engage intellectual conversation, theocratic debate and the recitation of poetry and folklore.

eighteenth century, and the retrenchment of public life that accompanied the subsequent period of political turmoil, resulted in a reduction in the overall consumption of the beverage.[268]

The establishment of the Qajar dynasty in the early nineteenth century revived trade and social life in Iran, which materialized as an increased consumption of imported commodities. As Iran integrated into the world economy in the 1800s, it developed a commercial relationship with the Russian empire, which facilitated the introduction of the samovar to the Qajar royal court and ultimately precipitated Iran's conversion to a tea-drinking nation.[269] By 1880, tea/coffeehouses had become a regular feature of Iran's urban landscape. Revelry once again entered the café space, as the social consumption of tea became associated with the accompaniment of itinerant entertainers. In the early twentieth century, during the Constitutional Revolution, however, the tea/coffeehouse transformed to a place where people gathered to hear political news. The emergence and proliferation of tea/coffeehouses, therefore, created a public sphere that posed a threat to the authority of the state.[270]

Dissident café culture in Tehran goes back to the 1940s, when the modernization of Tehran's urban landscape took off. Back then, Café Naderi served as a bastion for Iran's intellectual elite and was frequented by prominent literary figures such as Sadegh Hedayat, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Simin Daneshvar and Nima Yooshij.[271] After the 1979 revolution, the Iranian government closed down many coffee shops, allegedly to combat the Western cultural onslaught. In contemporary Iran, the coffee shop serves as a bulwark of leisure in an otherwise restricted

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[268] Rudi Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Drugs and Stimulants in Iranian History, 1500-1900* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).
[269] Matthee contends that the increasingly common use of samovars not only resulted in the preference for tea among Iranians, but also contributed to the conversion of tea booths into sit-down establishments or "cafés" (teahouses).
[270] Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*.
[271] Modiri, "Mod," *Shūkhī Kardam*.

environment. It provides a place where young Iranians can feel free of inhibitions, and as a result, Millenial Iranians comprise the majority of the country's coffee shop patronage.

From 2006-2011 there was a five-fold increase in coffee imports into Iran, and coffee shops proliferated all over the country to accommodate the new practice of *kāfeneshīnī*.[272] Khosravi claims that coffee shops are among the sites in which young Iranians perform acts of defiance, contending that *kāfeneshīnī* is a new resistance practice of visibility. [273] He posits that while coffee shops are not "public spheres" in the Habermasian sense,[274] they do function as sites of "everyday resistance," in that they provide a space where the Third Generation can mingle with the opposite gender and exchange information about sex, *khārej*,[275] technology, fashion, cars or general lifestyle matters that they have been exposed to through the Internet or satellite television.[276]

According to my informants, however, coffee shops are considered an alternative place to socialize or use free wifi and thus have become trendy in contemporary Iran. Vashti claimed that coffee shops have become an integral part of Iranian youth culture, but observed, "It's still not really acceptable to take a laptop and sit in a coffee shop for an extended period of time. Like the guy gets upset that you've only gotten a glacé and have been there for six hours."[277] Coffee shops in Iran are therefore considered more a space for socialization rather than work or study. Khosravi observes that young Iranians (according to themselves) do not discuss "political aspirations" (*khāstehā-ye siāsi*) in coffee shops, but rather they talk tirelessly about their "social

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[272] *Kafeneshīnī* literally translates as "sitting in a café," and refers to the act as a practice of socialization.
[273] Khosravi, *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, 147.
[274] As in they are not sites in which the public may organize and form political opinions.
[275] Literally translates as "outside," but typically refers to the Western World.
[276] Khosravi, *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, 148.
[277] Vashti made this contention during one of our interviews at a university coffee shop, where she observed that students receive no grief from the management for doing just as she described. This, however, maybe be a unique feature of university vicinity coffee shops, as there is an expectation of patrons to nurse one beverage over an extended period of time while attending to their school work.

aspirations" (*khāstehā-ye ejtemā'-i*). He claims that there is a distinction between "political" issues that deal with anti-regime activities and "social" ones that highlight the "unpretentious" anxieties and needs of young people.[278]

A *Shūkhī Kardam* sketch satirizes the types of "unpretentious" discussions that focus on the social aspirations of the Third Generation. In this sketch, a supposedly cool and fashionable couple meets in a dark, smoky coffee shop. "A good place for a proposal," the woman states, to which the man responds, "Of course! My dear, did you think that, I, like these *ommol-hā*,[279] would take you to a well-lit, airy and cheerful place?!"[280] The couple then initiates the "modern" *khāstegāri* ritual,[281] which is humorously depicted as a bragging competition about the respective couples' most "desirable" characteristics to one another. The woman begins by announcing that she studied psychology, owns a manteaux boutique and has two Facebook accounts. The man laughs self assuredly and says he owns a body building gym, "is *sees-pack*"(has six-pack abs) and has his own film archive. The woman responds that she does Feng Shui and that her energy is *very* positive, while the man tells her that he participates in both success and *Konkur* classes. The woman tells her potential mate that she never wants to have children, to which he responds, "No, no, no! Just adopt!"[282] She suggests an "almond-eye" (Asian) child and he, a black baby. The woman quickly follows up that she draws and does photography. He interjects, "Oh my gosh!" (in English) and tells her that he is also a singer.[283] He asks her what she eats and she replies that she is a raw vegetarian and only eats salads. He responds that he is a *hīchī-nakhor*

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[278] Khosravi, *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, 149.
[279] This is a derogatory term used to described a old-fashion, unoriginal person, or in the vernacular of American millenials, "basic."
[280] Modiri, "Mod," Episode 15, *Shūkhi Kardam*.
[281] *Khāstegar* is the Persian word for "suitor." *Khāstegārī* refers to the ritual of the coming of the suitor to meet with his potential bride. As Iranian marriages were historically arranged, *khāstegārī* permitted the suitor (and his family) the opportunity to make a detailed set of inquiries about the would-be bride (her education, occupation, family and anything else that the bride would be contributing to the marriage), before asking for her hand.
[282] Modiri, "Mod," *Shūkhī Kardam*.
[283] Ibid.

(non-eater) and therefore does not eat anything at all. At this point the woman asks the man to marry her, he accepts and the sketch ends.

The insufferable behavior and attitude of the couple featured in this sketch humorously satirizes the very "unpretentious" conversations about social aspirations that Khosravi contends is the newest practice of resistance. Dark and dingy coffee shops may be the preferred meeting place for young Iranian couples, because they provide an escape from the otherwise heavily surveilled public sphere of the Islamic Republic, but the couple in the sketch displays a disdain for light, airy and cheerful places because they associate them with the old fashioned mentality of the lower/working class. Both parties mention hobbies that reflect the current trends in contemporary Iranian society, which tend toward the artistic aesthetic (however pretentious). Essentially everyone is a photographer, fashion designer, film aficionado, body builder, Feng Shui practitioner and participant of positive thinking courses. (Ostentatiously) less is more among this demographic, as the man bests his raw-vegetarian mate by declaring that he is a *hichi-nakhor* (non-eater), and actually does not consume food. While this sketch humorously ridicules the supposed pretention of the Millenial Generation, it also calls into question *kāfeneshīnī* as an act of resistance or even defiance.

As sites of socialization, coffee shops have become increasingly popular in Iran throughout the twenty-first century. Their popularity, however, has been countered by the state via raids, regulations and shutdowns by the morality police. A series of crackdowns took place on Iranian coffee shops in 2007 and again in 2012.[284] In July of 2012, the morality police stormed eighty-seven coffee shops in a single district of Tehran, and shut them down for not following Islamic values. The police also arrested a number of female customers for gender-

[284] Reuters, "Iran Shuts Down Coffee Shops in Morality Crackdown," Al Arabiya News (July 16, 2012), http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/07/16/226565.html.

specific violations, including smoking hookah, publicly socializing with men, and defying the Islamic dress code.[285] Omid commented on how Millenial Iranians remain undeterred by government crackdowns on coffee shops. "They always give problems (*gīr mīdan*)," he said, "They always harass you, but the people do what they want to do." He also described how remiss some coffee shops are to enforce the social restrictions dictated by the state:

> Some of the coffee shops and hookah lounges in Tehran are *very* open. There were two that I remember, if you took your own alcohol, they would serve it to you. That is if the owner knew you, he would serve you your alcohol.

According to Omid, one of these BYOB[286] coffee shops is in Shemshak, a ski resort located outside of Tehran.

While bars and nightclubs are strictly outlawed in the Islamic Republic, smoking is still permissible. Hookah lounges have thus become increasingly popular as a locale of leisure and have therefore proliferated throughout the country. Omid described the range in variety of hookah lounges in Iran:

> There is the manly type [of hookah lounge], in which there are just two long rows and everyone there is a *lāt*. Like a *lāt* in the old style, with the mustaches and fedora hats. There are also places that are very fancy from the decorative perspective. Luxury, as they are called. They use the word "luxury" a lot.

Hamrah also mentioned the prominence of "luxury" establishments, as he described coffee shop and hookah lounge culture in contemporary Iran:

> There are some places in Tehran called "luxury bars." The word "luxury" is used a lot in Tehran. And its pronunciation is very cute, like "luk-cherry." It's like a coffee shop, but its décor is like that of a hotel lobby. And they don't have baristas; instead you see a woman who is dressed like a flight attendant, standing behind a desk, as if in a hotel. You either go and give her your order, or she comes to you. Then they bring out hookahs. If a hookah costs fifty thousand in a regular coffee shop, in a luxury bar, it will cost two hundred thousand. These are VIP coffee shops. The elite go there. Rich Iranians go there.

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[285] Ibid.
[286] Bring Your Own Booze

This recent trend toward luxury coffee shops, as described by my informants, would indicate that "unpretentious social aspirations" do not necessarily translate to defiant resistance. Severely limited opportunities for fun and leisure, in addition to bleak employment possibilities, have created a situation in which a large portion of the population must find ways to occupy themselves. However, while the issues that Khosravi claims are "at stake" (a more liberal dress code, more moderate policies toward youth, or unemployment) may be discussed in coffee shops, it is difficult to justify resistance in this context of luxury. In fact, by partaking in trends that define their "social aspirations," Iranian Millenials actually perpetuate commodity culture and reify the definitive role of class identity with their society.

***Dor-Dor*: Luxury Driven Leisure**

Automobiles have played a significant role in the emergence of the commodity culture in Millenial Iran. More so than in the Western World, cars in Iran represent socioeconomic class, status and masculinity.[287] *Dor-dor* is one of the primary leisure activities of today's Iranian youth. Mostafa explained, "*Dor-dor* is when you drive around the boulevard, check out the cars next to you and start talking between cars." *Dor-Dor* is an example of automobility, a term coined by John Urry. Urry defines automobility as a worldwide, self-organizing, autopoietic, nonlinear system that includes cars, car-drivers, roads, petroleum supplies, technologies and signs.[288] In the context of contemporary Iran, automobility refers to the use of cars not just for transportation, but also for leisure, entertainment, socialization and dating. Norma Claire Moruzzi contends that the post-Revolutionary Islamicization of Iranian society has resulted in the reversal of the public/private dichotomy, rendering public space the sphere of control and

[287] Pascal Menoret, *Joyriding in Riyadh: Oil, Urbanism, and Road Revolt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
[288] John Urry, "The 'System' of Automobility," *Theory, Culture and Society* 21, Iss. 4-5 (2004): 27.

private space the realm of freedom.[289] The Millenial Generation's practice of automobility is therefore a result of this reversal of the public/private dichotomy, as young Iranians have been conditioned to view and utilize their vehicles as a private space in which "fun" may be had.

Dor-dor, however, also demonstrates the socio-economic disparities extant in today's Iran, specifically among Millenial Iranians. Khosravi observes that social inequalities generate stratified mobility and immobility reproduces social inequality.[290] For this reason, cars have become a signifier of class in today's Iran. Mostafa commented on this, in his discussion of how the make and model of one's car warranted access to particular neighborhoods in Tehran. He stated, "Cruising in Iran is based on neighborhoods. You have to have a certain type of car to be able to talk to a girl in Niāvarān.[291] The middle class typically cruises around Tehran Pars." Omid confirmed Mostafa's observation, stating:

> There are a couple of famous streets that we would drive around on. Everyone can go there, but you notice a difference (in experience) based on the type of car you drive. In Iran, guys typically approach and initiate conversation with women. The response that they get is entirely based on the price of their car. You can see this perfectly.

Omid's description of *dor-dor* demonstrates how this particular youth trend lends to the role of class identity in Millenial Iran. After the 1979 Revolution and through the mid 1990s, the cars in Iran were primarily domestic-made or older foreign-made cars that had been imported before the revolution. Back then, the domestic-made Peykan did not function as a signifier of class because it served solely as a means of transportation. Luminita Gatejel demonstrates how this was also the case in socialist countries.[292] After the Iran-Iraq War, and the liberalization of the market, foreign cars began to be imported into Iran once again. Within the last decade, there has been an

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[289] Norma Claire Moruzzi, "Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire: Young Iranian Women Today," Iran: Looking Ahead (MER 241), Vol. 36 (2006).
[290] Khosravi, Precarious Lives, 156.
[291] An affluent and upper-class district in the foothills of North Tehran.
[292] Luminata Gatejel, "The Common Heritage of the Socialist Car Culture," in *The Socialist Car: Automobility in the Eastern Bloc*, Ed. L. Siegelbaum, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2011).

increase in the number of cars in Iran that are worth fifty times that of the average car price. Omid describes how cars began to serve as markers of socioeconomic class in Iran, stating:

> Until around 1380 or Khatami's second term, the economy of the country was not in good shape. When I was in high school, a "good car" meant an older car of the better brands. There were none of these *khafan* cars that you see today. After '80, it became normalized and automobiles became the main indication of wealth. Like people were able to *see* that the guy is wealthy [because of his car]. Before that, society wasn't rich enough to allow people to do this sort of thing; it was limited to a number of people. There wasn't wealth to this degree.

Omid's statement refers to the influx of wealth to the country during the Ahmadinejad administration (see Chapter Two), which has resulted in the vast socio-economic disparity extant in contemporary Iran. More significantly, it demonstrates how the neoliberal economic policies touted by the Islamic Republic since the Reconstruction Era have contributed to the emergence of a commodity culture and the creation of a society in which class identity plays a prominent role.

Drugs in Iran: A Flower By Any Other Name

Rampant drug addiction is a consequence of unemployment, impoverishment and limited options for recreation. In 2013, when Ahmadinejad left office, the official youth unemployment rate was at twenty-eight percent, while inflation ran at forty-two percent. This situation was exacerbated by U.S. and European economic sanctions and served to turn even more Iranians to hard drugs. Nahid Siamdoust describes how the social ailments plaguing Iran, approximately a decade ago, had a particularly adverse affect on the youth, preparing the way for a country-wide drug epidemic. She stated:

> I was working as a journalist in Iran during those years and vividly remember the sense of desperation and hopelessness about the future among many young people. Not only was unemployment very high, even among the well educated, the state's restrictions on the public sphere also meant that there were very few possibilities for leisure or

> entertainment that appealed to the large youth bulge that was coming of age in those years of Iran's opening to the world and the world's opening onto itself, thanks to the Internet and process of globalization. In the absence of unregulated concerts, cafes and bars in public spaces where young people would feel at ease, they often met in each other's homes instead. The downside of this privatization of social activity was that drug consumption could and would happen more easily.[293]

Siamdoust thus arrives at the same conclusion as Moruzzi, that the reversal of the public/private dichotomy has had deleterious effects on contemporary Iranian youth culture; in this case it has precipitated and facilitated recreational drug abuse.

Ahmadinejad's populist policies, abetted by American and European sanctions, resulted in a flailing economy, which sent the rial tumbling, the inflation rate soaring, and the illegal drugs trade booming. As Siamdoust observed, high rates of unemployment engendered a pervasive sense of hopelessness, and this desperation drove many young Iranians to seek comfort in the mollifying effects of drugs; state-imposed social restrictions generated tension, stress and depression among the youth, who used drugs as a temporary escape from their problems. In 2009, it was estimated that 130,000 Iranians become addicted to drugs per year, yet over a six-year period, only half a million people received treatment in a drug program.[294]

Drug addiction is thus a serious problem in contemporary Iran. In 2010 the United Nations World Drug Report listed Iran as having the highest number of opium addicts in the world.[295] Afghanistan is the world's biggest producer of opium and Iran lies directly in the path of the world's largest flow of heroin. Refined heroin, morphine and raw opium leave Afghanistan and enter Iran at an estimated rate of 140 metric tons per year, of which only thirty-two tons are intercepted by state authorities.[296] In 2014, Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli, Iran's Interior Minister, announced that six million Iranians were affected by problems related to drug

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[293] Siamdoust, *Soundtrack of the Revolution*, 190.
[294] "Iran Drug Addiction," *Narconon*, http://www.narconon.org/drug-information/iran-heroin-drug-addiction.html.
[295] United Nation Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *World Drug Report* (Vienna: United Nations, 2010).
[296] "Iran Drug Addiction," *Narconon*.

addiction. Analysts describe Iran's heroin addiction problem as one of the worst in the world, and estimates vary from one million to more than three million habitual drug users.

Drug addiction drastically increased in the 1990s. Iran's welfare organization and the United Nations Drug Control Program estimate that there are two million addicts in Iran, of which over sixty percent are between the ages of twenty and forty. At the beginning of Ahmadinejad's presidential tenure in 2005, there was a considerable increase in the amount of amphetamines seized by Iranian authorities. At this time, the Islamic Republic also experienced a substantial growth in the demand for pseudoephedrine; wherever there is a supply of pseudoephedrine, amphetamine-type drugs can be manufactured. By 2008, authorities had seized 1.4 tons of amphetamine-class drugs, a number which increased to 2.4 tons in 2009.[297]

In *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, Khosravi describes Fandak Park, a park 150m away from the Golestan shopping center in Tehran. He observed that despite the availability of all kinds of drugs, young Iranians usually sought out hashish, which he said was called *bang* or *cīgārī*. He also noted that marijuana was available but very expensive. The difference between choosing to smoke marijuana or hashish, Khosravi asserts, is not only a question of socio-economic class, but also one of "global" versus "local." Hashish has been in Iran for centuries, the word is Persian and was derived from the medieval Hashashin movement; marijuana, on the other hand, is an emblem of Western youth styles.[298]

Hamrah told me about the current drug culture in Iran, and the increasing popularity of marijuana, or *gol* as Iranians call it, in recent years. He stated that marijuana has become trendy in Iran over the last couple of years. "Now, when you go to Iran, it's at all the parties. In the streets you see that people are smoking weed in their cars. It's everywhere," he said. Hamrah

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[297] Ibid.
[298] Khosravi, *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, 113.

explained why marijuana has become the intoxicant of choice among Iran's Millenial Generation, stating:

> Look, if they catch you with alcohol in Iran, or if you're drunk, they'll whip you. If they catch you with weed, you go to jail and you can buy your way out of it. If it's a lot, then you go to prison and that's that. But if it's a small amount, the penalty is jail time. Like you'll have to go to jail for three days. The penalties are different.

Hamrah explained that Millenial Iranians are beginning to prefer marijuana to alcohol because it is easier to use without detection. He claims that the police are not yet familiar enough with the drug to recognize that someone is on it, and that a lot of young Iranians grow it in their own yards, stating:

> If the police colonel comes into their house, he won't know that there's *gol* in the guy's yard. Believe me, he wouldn't know. For this reason, the person who grows it and sells it can do it with greater ease. It's easier to hide. The police have learned how to detect alcohol, but weed is harder for them.

Omid also described the advantages of drugs over alcohol in today's Iran. He confirmed what Hamrah claimed, stating:

> Drugs are used because they are fun. Now, in today's Iran it has an advantage. If you drink alcohol, it is obvious. But a lot of drugs, at least when they first arrived on the scene, were not easily identifiable. If someone saw you high on the street, they could not identify what it was. Although now, it is so routine that everyone is at least familiar with it.

Hamrah also asserted that drugs have become preferred over alcohol because they are easier to transport, stating:

> In Tehran, I have a weed guy. You call him and he brings it for you. Alcohol is the same, but the alcohol guys *nāz mīkonan*[299] because when you call for alcohol, the guy insists that you buy two or three bottles; he wants to reap the most profit from his trip. If they stop him somewhere along the way, hiding a couple of bottles of alcohol is very difficult. But if the guy has two grams of weed … and they usually come on motorcycles … he can hide it anywhere. There's no risk. So he drives his motorcycle here and there and hides it in the parks, in several locations all over Tehran. There's one guy who watches over the stuff, and there are a couple of guys cruising on their motorcycles with

[299] Act coquettishly.

> their cellphones. When they get a call, they go get the weed from the nearest park that they have stashed it at and deliver it to your door.

Hamrah's comment also points to the significant role that motorcycle couriers have played in providing contraband to the Iranian people after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Initially providing videotapes and bootleg alcohol, the motorcycle couriers of today's Iran have graduated to recreational drugs.

During the Ahmadinejad era, *shīshe* (meth) exploded on the Iranian drug market. While opium is still the most popular drug in Iran, for the first time meth overtook heroin as the country's second most popular drug. Meth production in the Islamic Republic expanded at an alarming rate during the Ahmadinejad era. According to a 2013 United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime study, the first incident of crystal meth manufacturing in Iran was reported in 2007, when four production facilities were seized. By 2012 Iran had become the world's fourth highest importer of pseudoephedrine, the main precursor chemical used in the production of crystal meth. According to the State Welfare Organization, over half a million Tehranis between the ages of fifteen and forty-five have used crystal meth at least once in their lifetime.[300] The rapid growth in *shīshe* use is partly due to the falsely held belief that it is less addictive than heroin. Because crystal meth is more expensive than heroin, young Iranians considered it a luxury drug for a while and it became the fashionable drug of choice for some time. Hamrah spoke a little bit about how *shīshe* was viewed by his generation when it first hit the scene and how it is currently perceived. He asserted that meth became popular among Millenial Iranians around 2009 (coinciding with Ahmadinejad's second term), because it was a new alternative. He stated:

> Because what drugs were there before? There was opium, which the old men smoke. Some people smoked hashish, but no one enjoyed being around them. Then meth came out, and people went crazy; like they would smoke *shīshe* morning to night … the people

[300] Ramita Navai, "Breaking Bad in Tehran: How Iran Got a Taste for Crystal Meth," *The Guardian*, May 13, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/13/breaking-bad-tehran-iran-crystal-meth-methamphetamine.

> who used to do heroine, now do meth, although it used to be *very* expensive in Iran. Like sugar, it looks like grains of sugar. Sixty thousand tomans would buy only five grains. I was student then, working, and my salary was 300,000 tomans (per month). So it was very expensive. And it was kind of *bā-kelās* ("classy"), but now I hear that it has become cheap. So the injection addicts go after it. They do *shīshe* instead of shooting heroine.

As of 2017, marijuana use makes up twelve percent of Iran's drug consumption, while methamphetamine use has dropped to eight percent.[301] Hamrah asserted that young Iranians also use MDMA, usually at secret rave parties, but one has to know people in order to get in. "Usually it's a garden outside of Tehran, where they have these rave parties and sell MDMA, but it's not specific to any particular socio-economic sector," he said.

In the past, drug addiction was more prevalent among the poor, but in the contemporary period, drug addiction is not limited to a particular socio-economic class and can afflict any member of society, regardless of their financial status. Cocaine is a regular feature at the parties held and attended by Tehran's upper-class elite. Young people throughout the capital smoke marijuana and pop ecstasy pills, while heroin addicts typically gather together to shoot up in the street corners of south Tehran. Despite having a reputation of being old-fashioned, opium is still the most popular recreational drug in Iran and using it is still widely considered to be a culturally acceptable pastime.

In recent years, an increasing number of young Iranian women have turned to drugs as a means to lose weight, because they believe it is a cheaper alternative to liposuction. Hannah confirmed this, stating that crystal meth was available in many beauty parlors because it was sought after so much by women seeking ways to become thinner. She revealed that her own uncle's wife owned a beauty salon in which the drug was sold, although she later discovered that her aunt had been hospitalized for drug addiction. Meth was widely available at Iranian beauty

[301] Bethan McKernan, "Number of Drug Addicts in Iran 'Doubles' in Six Year," Independent, June 26, 2017, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iran-tehran-drug-addiction-opium-heroin-afghanistan-taliban-a7809046.html, accessed January 27, 2018.

salons, until a member of parliament called for a clampdown. Many beauty parlors stopped stocking it, but demand for it is still high.[302] Body builders and athletes reportedly use the drug as a means of maintaining high levels of energy.

Do You Even Lift, Bro?

Throughout the Ahmadinejad period, as Millenial Iranians continued to endure a sense of disenchanted powerlessness, they turned their attentions inward. Their physical selves proved to be the realm in which they could exert the greatest degree of control. Various modes of body modification, therefore, have become the means through which young Iranians assert their autonomy and agency. This, in tandem with the "selfie culture" that emerged with the Post-Network Era worldwide, has resulted in an increased concern for physical fitness, or at least the appearance of, among the Millenial Generation, and has thus given rise to the "gym" trend in contemporary Iran. Khosravi noted that Western forms of fitness had spread among Iran's Third Generation in the first decade of the twenty-first century.[303] The trend has continues to remain popular among the Millenial Generation, as can be witnessed in the following *Shūkhī Kardam* monologue. In this sketch, Modiri claims that Iranians use the word *bāshgā*[304] (gym) at least four hundred times a day. He states:

> Gym. Why don't you come? I'm going to the gym. Well why don't you go? I'm going to the gym. Well what happened with that whole issue? I'm at the gym. Well why don't you eat anything? Gym?! Well hurry up and come, it's getting late! After the gym. Well why didn't you say—Before the gym. I'm at the gym. Come for a minute. I'm going to the gym. Well why don't you say so?! Gym. Why don't you answer your phone? I'm in

[302] Navai, "Breaking Bad in Tehran," *The Guardian*.
[303] Khosravi, *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, 161.
[304] *Bāshghā* used to mean "club," but is now used to refer to "the gym" in today's Persian vernacular.

> the middle of the gym. Why don't you eat your breakfast—my gym! Why don't you drop dead?! Gym! Of course it's good for a person to exercise, but—Gym![305]

Modiri's monologue suggests that (going to) the gym has become an acceptable response to, and an excuse for, all requests and inquiries in today's Iran. Omid remarked on the acumen of the above satire and commented on the role that the gym plays in Iran's Millenial culture. He stated:

> My friends joke that as *dokhtar bāzi* and *pesar bāzi* has increased among our generation, at the very least it has resulted in everyone going to the gym. In the past few years, it has become fashionable. But the reason Iranians go to the gym is not for their health; they go to the gym so they can look good.

He claimed that the gym trend is a very recent phenomenon, as up to the Ahmadinejad Era, exercise was not very commonplace among adults. "Children might have exercised at school or attended after school programs," he stated, "But among adults, it wasn't really practiced." Omid's statement also points to the prevalence of "gym culture" versus exercise culture in today's Iran. While exercise equipment exists in parks throughout the country, they are not typically utilized by Millenial Iranians. Exercise, as a practice, has not become fashionable, but rather the act of going to the gym. As Omid stated, "It was only in the last eight, nine, ten years that going to the gym became a standard part of the daily routine."

Hamrah had a similar take on the gym phenomenon as Omid, although he was much more critical of the trend and viewed it from the socioeconomic perspective. He asserted that bodybuilders are not athletes, and claimed that many use steroids and even prosethetics (as in prosthetic "six-packs") to enhance their appearance. Hamrah contended that there are a series of classical Iranian sports, such as soccer and wrestling, whose national teams are typically comprised of athletes hailing from the lower to middle socio-economic classes. "But there are some sports that belong to the rich kids," he said, "Go-carting, for example. Like the guy has a

[305] Modiri, "Mod," Episode 16, *Shūkhi Kardam*, http://www.iranproud.net/series/Shookhi-kardam/episodes/mod2.

go-cart that he's shipped from Dubai. Or snowboarding. Snowboarding is for the upper class. And body building." Hamrah also discussed the recent spread of "luxury" gyms in Iran. He reiterated the prevalence of the word "luxury" in Millenial Iranian vernacular, and claimed, "The word is used a lot in Tehran." He then referred back to his cousin, Saeed, who works at a "luxury gym" in the Niāvarān. Membership to these luxury gyms costs around two million tomans a month, Hamrah reported, which goes up to around three million if the member has a personal trainer. "Those gyms are specifically for rich people," he said, because "who can pay three million toman a month for a gym membership?" Hamrah's commentary demonstrates how class identity is used to define the fitness and exercise trends of Iranian Millenial culture; the "Rich Kids of Tehran" partake in the types of sports and activities that define them as such.

Hannah, who describes herself as member of the upper class, confirmed the increase of "luxury sports" among her peers, such as skiing, horse back riding and off-roading. She also mentioned tennis, which while not exclusively a "rich kid" sport, does boast its own "luxury" facilities in Iran. Hannah described an "underground" sports complex in Darakeh, where she and her husband would go play tennis. The complex had the façade of a house and people had to be buzzed in, she said. The owner of the complex was reputed to be a very powerful man, and rumor had it that it was for this reason that the complex had not yet been shut down. "A property that large could easily be surveilled by helicopter," Hannah mused. She then described the somewhat illicit manner in which they played tennis within this sports complex, stating:

> It was a big complex, with eight or nine tennis courts. And when we would go there, we would take off our *manteaux* and *rūsarī* and just wear tops and shorts. We would play tennis and it was unrestricted. You can do everything in Iran; you just have to know people. You know how, like, whenever you do something secretly, it's more fun? It was like that.

The last part of Hannah's comment subtly suggests that Iranian Millenials (of the class with which she identifies) partake in illicit activities, not as a means of resistance or even defiance, but rather because they think it is *fun*. This questions the validity of claims that Iranian youth culture is characterized by a tendency to defy, but also brings to fore the issue of class identity. Hannah does not mention wealth as a necessary factor for engaging in fun/illicit activities; instead, she insists that it is a derivative of *who* you know. This demonstrates how the trends that Iranian Millenials chose to partake in actually function as a type of class currency; an Iranian Millenial wanting to identify with Tehran's urban elite can do so by following the trends that are popular among that group, regardless of his or her actual socioeconomic status.

Iran: The Nose Job Capital of the World

Assertion of the self through body modification takes its most blatant form as plastic surgery, although ironically, this practice is the most culturally accepted one in Iran. Plastic surgery has been and continues to be rampant in the Islamic Republic; it is so commonplace that it has effectively become ritualized as part of the coming of age process in today's Iran. Modiri mocks this ritual in a sketch that features a woman on an operating table awaiting surgery. When the doctor asks the patient to clarify what she wants done, she responds:

> First of all, I want to do my nose, so that when viewed from the front it appears upturned and doll-like, and when viewed from my profile, it faces forward. Then, my cheekbones. I want two different operations done on my cheekbones, so that when I laugh a one-and-a-half-centimeter dimple appears on my right cheek, while my left cheek goes up. Then, if possible, I want to pull the skin under my eyes so that my wrinkles disappear. Now, for my left eyelid, pull it up, so that when you look at me from the front, I look very charismatic and when you look at my profile, I look very surprised. Also, Mr. Doctor, I wanted to request that you to *tear* my jaw *off* and push it back, so that my face appears thinner and better. But then you'll have to operate on my chin to bring it up. If possible, please do all of these operations today because I'm invited to a wedding the day after tomorrow.[306]

[306] Modiri, "Mod," Episode 15, *Shūkhi Kardam*.

This sketch satirizes the plastic surgery obsession that characterizes contemporary Iranian society, ridiculing the nonchalant attitude Iranians boast regarding plastic surgery, as if it is as commonplace as a trip to the beauty salon before a wedding.

Tehran currently hosts one of the largest rhinoplasty markets in the world and "nose jobs" are the most sought-after cosmetic surgery in Iran. It is estimated that approximately seventy thousand procedures are carried out annually in Tehran, of which seventy-five percent of patients are female and between the ages of 18-25. For this reason, Western media have dubbed Iran as the "nose job capital" of the world. While the practice and desired aesthetic of rhinoplasty may be interpreted as an indication of growing Western-style consumption and influence in Iran, Sara Lenehan argues that this trend of rampant cosmetic surgery should be understood in terms of social wealth and power, which are values that connect to local class insecurities and systems of prestige.[307] On the other hand, Pardis Mahdavi claims that nose jobs (and increased use of makeup) can be considered acts of rebellion, positing that makeup, style and behavior are essential components of social movements. She asserts that for young people, "the absence of an option to express dissent or unhappiness with the regime overtly results in concentrating their efforts on looking good as a way to speak back to the regime."[308] While the notion of an increased attentiveness to the self is apparent in Mahdavi's contention, it is important to note that the Islamic Republic has *not* fettered the surge of cosmetic surgery sweeping Iran and has actually sanctioned the procedure since the early 1980s. This is particularly interesting considering that the type of nose desired is based on a Western ideal. Drawing on Featherstone's contention that the aestheticization of the body is a cornerstone of consumer culture, the

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[307] Sara Lenehan, "Nose Aesthetics: Rhinoplasty and Identity in Iran," *Anthropology of the Middle East* 6 (2011): 47.
[308] Ibid., 56.

countrywide practice and government sanction of plastic surgery invalidates the claim of it as an act of defiance, resistance or rebellion.[309] Most of my informants said that it is simply a matter of aesthetics—Iranians want to achieve beauty as it has become locally understood.

Hamrah discussed the most recent trends in plastic surgery in Millenial Iran. He observed that while in the past, it was very typical for women to get nose jobs, this trend has now become prevalent among Iranian men as well. He also commented that both women *and* men inject their lips and cheekbones with fillers, while breast augmentations and butt implants have dramatically increased. Omid confirmed the omnipresence of rhinoplasty among Millenial Iranians, although he disagreed with Hamrah regarding the prevalence of other cosmetic enhancement procedures among Iranian men, stating:

> Most of the girls that I know in Iran have gotten nose jobs. In Iran, rhinoplasty is very normal. I mean four of my cousins have had nose jobs. And this is among the youth. Among the older crowd, cheeks and skin and breasts. Among men, noses, but other surgeries, as far as I know, not so much. But cosmetic surgery is done very frequently, especially among women.

Omid also discussed how the cosmetic surgery trend is beginning earlier and earlier among the Millenial Generation. He claimed that during his adolescence, the norm was after high school graduation, but that today, many young Iranians are going under the knife even before finishing the twelfth grade.

Sara also reiterated that rhinoplasty is the most common form of plastic surgery done in Iran, followed by breast augmentations and lip fillers. "They all look like porn stars," she said derisively, and then mentioned an incident in which a British adult film star had come to Iran for cosmetic surgery, to prove her point. This porn star, aware of the country's reputation for specializing in rhinoplasty, had come to Iran to undergo the procedure. She had then posted on her Facebook page that Iranian girls all seemed to look like her. This was followed by a public

[309] Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Sage, 1991).

outcry, as many (conservative) Iranians reproached the Islamic state for issuing a visa to an adult film star, but the authorities pleaded ignorance, claiming that they had been unable to recognize the woman because they were unfamiliar with her "work."

Vashti commented that the most prevalent trend in Iranian plastic surgery is to make oneself look more "Caucasian." "They say, 'My nose is big, fat and points down; make it small. Make it upturned'," she said, "and eventually it falls off the other side of the roof."[310] She continued that a "surgery nose" is a commodity in itself and that Iranians often flaunt their procedures by keeping on their post-operation bandages for months longer than necessary. In doing so, young Iranians tacitly demonstrate their advocacy for consumer culture. As plastic surgery is not considered immoral or detrimental to the maintenance of an Islamic society, the Millenial Generation's eager willingness to go under the knife is neither resistance nor rebellion; instead it is an assumption of consumerism through the appropriation of [imagined] Western standards of beauty. The ubiquity of plastic surgery, specifically rhinoplasty, across socioeconomic lines not only indicates the prevalence of commodity culture in Iranian society, but it also exemplifies how trends function as class currency in Millenial Iran. By modifying their body in accordance to the preferred aesthetic that predominates contemporary Iranian beauty ideals, Millenial Iranians are able to present themselves with a particular class identity, thus demonstrating how trends serve as class markers in today's Iran, and how the Millenial Generation manipulates these trends to navigate and assert themselves within a class-stratified, Post-Network society.

[310] This is a literally translated Persian expression that conveys *excess*.

For the Love of Money

The commodity-driven consumer culture that defines today's Iran emerged from the neoliberal economic policy that has been espoused by the Islamic state, beginning with Rafsanjani's reconstruction efforts. Since then, there has been an increasing flow of wealth into the country (as discussed in Chapter Two), which began to materialize during the Ahmadinejad administration. As the accouterments of wealth and opulence gained more visibility in Iranian society, the phenomenon of *cheshm o ham cheshmi*[311] intensified. This, combined with the disillusionment of Iranian youth, which was brought about from an increasing sense of powerlessness within the repressive environment of an imposed theocracy, resulted in the emergence of a society in which class identity plays a predominant role. While monetary resources not always necessary for the projection of a particular class identity (as has been described above), there is no denying that wealth translates to more opportunities for the pursuance of fun, leisure and fashion. Furthermore, it also has significant implications for the perpetuation of patriarchy and the determination of gender roles in Millenial Iranian society. An example of this is how Mehran Modiri began the "Economy" episode of *Shūkhī Kardam* with the following monologue:

> Men, altogether, fall into three categories. The first category of men are those who throw an SUV under their wife's foot and cover her with jewelry, head to toe. All of the lady's clothes are brand name. Her bank account is *vā-vaylā*, and he does not allow her to step one foot away from the digital satellite television. They call these men "Real Men." The second category of men dredge away their lives, pay rent, the water bill, electric bill and phone bill, and for the children's educational expenses, as well as all of the wife's expenses. Then when you ask his wife, "Farhad is a really good guy. Poor thing works so hard, doesn't he?" The wife spitefully smiles and says, "*Dandesh narm.*"[312] This group of men are called *Dandesh Narm* men. The third category consists of men who *had* factories, who *had* villas, who *had* property. They *had* all the good things. The difference between these men and the men of the first category is that these men all passed away two years ago and everything remained for their wives and children. They

[311] Roughly translates to "Keeping up with the Joneses" or competitive emulation.
[312] "May his rib break," … meaning may he break his rib, implying that he deserves what he gets.

> call these men "Dream Men." All other men basically fall into the category of *nā-mard*[313].[314]

In this monologue, husbands are categorized by their ability to financially provide for their wives. "Real men" are defined as men who lavish a multitude of extravagances upon their wives. Men who break their backs toiling to provide for their wives and family are presented as contemptible, and "Dream Men" are those men who no longer burden their wives with their existence, but posthumously continue to care for them via their grand estates. All other men are considered *nā-mard* (non-men) or essentially inconsequential, for an Iranian man's worth is supposedly measured by his ability to display his financial prowess through lavish expenditures upon his wife. While the monologue satirically mocks the avaricious tendencies of contemporary Iranian women, it also points to how notions of masculinity are increasingly tied to representations of wealth in contemporary Iranian society.

I asked Hannah what makes an ideal husband and she responded, "To be able to pay for living expenses … To be in a good financial situation … It's mostly how rich a person is that matters in Iran." As a follow-up, I asked her husband, Mostafa, what masculinity meant in Iranian culture and he responded, "Being able to make enough money to pay for a house and living expenses. Everyone thinks this." I asked Pooneh what is considered an ideal man in contemporary Iranian society. She responded, "For me, an ideal man is someone who has a suitable occupation, so that he's not helpless in the event of an unfortunate situation. Now if I want to describe the minimal requirements in Iran, he must have a house and make enough money to cover living expenses." Vashti, on the other hand, asserted that this is not a case specific to Iran. She stated:

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[313] Literally translates to "non-men," but implies cowardice.

[314] Mehran Modiri, "Eghtesād," Episode 13, *Shūkhi Kardam*, http://www.iranproud.net/series/Shookhi-kardam/episodes/eghtesad.

> It's not Iran versus the rest of the world. It's like this everywhere. The wealthier a man is, the more superior he is considered. I don't think there is much of a difference in Iran, in this regard. If a man has money or a house, they call him an "ideal man," as far as finances are concerned anyway.

Hadi reflected that the pre-defined gender roles in Iran have resulted in an expectation of men to be the primary breadwinners of their domicile. He stated, "A man *must* have a job and be able to provide. An Iranian man has this expectation from himself, even if society does not *directly* tell him to go get married and work to create an independent life." As the above monologue suggests, however, an Iranian man's worth is determined by his ability to provide financially, even still today. This cultural expectation of gender roles thus reifies masculine pre-eminence, while simultaneously encouraging the commodity culture that prevails in Millenial Iran.

Surfeit Sexuality: Modern Romance in Today's Iran

Conceptions of masculinity tied to the circulation of commodities, the prevalence of Post-Network technologies and practices, an omnipresent sense of sociopolitical disenchantment and a resultant shift of attention toward the self, have all contributed to the emergence of a new sexual culture in Millenial Iran. Sara, one of my informants, asserted that her generation's attitude toward sex is one of insatiable greed (*tama'*). Indeed there is a marked enthusiasm for sexual exploration among Millenial Iranians, as Moruzzi observes that "widespread public displays of heterosexual affection, including kissing, flirting and horseplay, and even religious girls and boys 'hanging out' together, mark the new generation as pleasure seekers."[315] Similar to Siamdoust's reasoning for the rampant drug addiction epidemic that is sweeping Iran, Moruzzi

[315] Moruzzi, "Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire."

asserts that the transition of heterosexual social activity to the private sphere of the home has resulted in an "increased sexual precocity and promiscuity among the new generation."[316]

Despite the fact that expressions of sexuality have become less taboo and more commonplace in today's Iran, the practice of sexuality, as undertaken by Iranian Millenials, continues to be a male dominated experience. Moruzzi notes that there are three prevalent discourses on sexuality in today's Iran: the government's citation of Islamic law and Shi'i jurisprudence, the conventions of social practice, and the attitudes and behaviors of the Third Generation.[317] The common factor in all three discourses is the binary relation of female passivity to male activity. Virginity, in the parental generation's mentality, was the emblem of female modesty; this notion continues to persist among Millenial Iranians, although it no longer serves as a detriment to premarital sexual activity. In addition to physical alternatives to vaginal intercourse, doctors in Iran have increasingly capitalized on the demand for hymen repair surgery. Hannah confirmed that Iranian women often medically restore their "virginity" before marriage, and noted that this phenomenon exists within all socioeconomic classes. At the same time her husband reiterated, "Virginity, for girls, is still considered important."

The domesticization of heterosexual social relations has therefore been detrimental to Iranian women. This is because the private sphere remains largely under the control of men, while women continue to be financially and socially less privileged than their male counterparts within the theocracy. Young Iranian women have sacrificed the security that their chastity afforded them within both marriage and the family home in order to negotiate more open sexual relations, but they pursue this without a fully developed conception of feminism. This, Moruzzi claims, has resulted in a double standard for today's Iranian women, whose expression of

[316] Ibid.
[317] Ibid.

sexuality continues to takes place within a masculinist oriented society. Pooneh described the double standard held for Iranian girlfriends and Iranian wives. She stated, "Just as they want a submissive wife in marriage, if you're going to be someone's girlfriend, you have to be *sheytūn*." I asked her what *sheytūn* meant, and she responded, "Be sharp-tongued. Be a tease. Be elusive. Be attentive to your womanhood. Wear pretty and colorful clothes. Be bourgeoisie and high class. These are all desired traits for girlfriends in Iran."

In situations of unequal but relatively free gender relations, women must utilize whatever resources they have at hand to assert their agency. Moruzzi claims that this typically takes the form of the refinement of traditional feminine charms: fashion, make-up and sex appeal, or essentially what Pooneh describes above. However, my other informants talked about Millenial Iranian women taking on a more proactive role in their negotiation of acceptable sexual mores within today's Iranian society. For example, Sepideh recounted going through security at the Ahvaz airport. The security agent had asked for her cellphone and she placed it on the conveyor belt. The security agent asked her how many cellphones she had, and she answered, "How many *should* I have? I just have one. How many do people have?" The security agent's response was that women today have three to four cellphones, one for each boyfriend. Sepideh's anecdote points to how Millenial Iranian women can assert their class identity through adherence to a particular trend, in this case, participating in polyamory.

Rather than resistance in the form of sexual revolution, as posited by Mahdavi, Moruzzi claims that the Millenial Generation's practice of sexuality "retains a deeply conventional romanticism."[318] However, she asserts that the feminism espoused by Iran's Millenial Generation lacks a critical perspective on the expression of sexuality. This underdeveloped conception of feminism that currently prevails in Iranian society has had a significant impact on

[318] Ibid.

the way that Millenial Iranians approach romantic relationships, which is largely influenced by a perceived norm that supposedly exists in the Western World, as Pooneh described:

> There is this mentality that undergirds Iranian society, in which they imagine that the ultimate freedom exists in the West. So they (Third Generation Iranians) do whatever they want to do, in the name of this freedom. They say that it is the same abroad (*khārej*). The last time I was in Iran, I could really notice this trend among those around me. Like the typical Iranian guy has three girlfriends!

Sohrab and Sepideh also commented on the Millenial Generation's unbridled enthusiasm to engage in sexual activity, striving to achieve the same degree or surpass that which is done in *khārej* (the "West"). Sohrab asserted that polyamory has become an "epidemic" in the last four years or so. When I asked why, Sepideh responded that it was considered fashionable. She stated, "It has become trendy. Like the more boyfriends you have, the higher your level of class." Sepideh's comment demonstrates how engagement in sexual activity is actually another trend that is used by Iranian Millenials to signify class identity and move between class groups.

Sara discussed the sexual freedoms that her generation is currently experiencing in Iran. She was critical, however, of her generation's embrace of this sexual culture, stating:

> Group sex has become very common. The atmosphere has become incredibly absurd, but this is because there is an insatiable greed among people. Until now, they have never had this type of sexual freedom … there was no room for it in their culture. But now that they have been exposed to it, they don't have any boundaries. Morals no longer exist. I agree with white marriages,[319] but it's not something that is readily accepted in current [Iranian] society. Everyone sleeps with everyone. Men have who have wives, go get girlfriends. They sleep around. Women cheat on their husbands. Infidelity has shot up in Iran.

Sara's stated disapproval and criticism of her generation's behavior and attitude toward sex and sexuality demonstrates that not all Millenial Iranians subscribe to or partake in the relatively new sexual culture that has emerged in today's Iran; it exemplifies how trends are utilized by the

[319]"White marriage" or *Ezdevāj-e sefīd* is the term used to describe pre-marital co-habitation in Millenial Iran.

Millenial Generation to present their identity and move among various social groups in today's Iran.

Increased interest in sexual exploration has, however, contributed to the "opening up" of Iranian society, according to my informants. Sara stated that what was taboo before is no longer taboo, like having a boyfriend or a girlfriend. "Everyone displays their relationship on Facebook and Instagram. They post pictures together," she said, pointing to the role that social media has played in liberalizing the more traditional aspects of Iranian society. Hamid agreed with Sara, and reiterated that his generation has broken the taboos on romantic relationships and sexuality. He stated:

> Compared to ten years ago, there is more freedom, from all perspectives. Ten years ago, if a guy sat in the park with his girlfriend, there was reason to worry, because someone would always come and ask, "What's your relationship to one another? Why is your arm around her?" Now, it's not like that anymore. Society has become much more open. But people are also unfamiliar with this openness and are excited to try it out. Like white marriages have become fashionable in Iran. Swingers have also become ala mode.

Hannah echoed Sara and Hamid's claim that white marriages have increased among Iranian Millenials, but she asserted that it is not yet commonplace. Omid was less critical of the "immorality" exhibited by Iranian Millenials regarding their sexual exploration, but he also reiterated that certain concepts, such as white marriages, are still very much taboo in Iranian culture. He claimed that whatever expression of sexuality is undertaken in Iran today, is done so behind closed doors, stating:

> A while ago I heard on the Iranian television that white marriages are increasing, but I don't know anyone personally who has done that. I don't think it is looked upon favorably. I think a very small percentage of society accepts this, especially for girls, because there is more pressure on girls in this society. I think most girls wouldn't even accept this themselves … In Iran, a lot of things happen, but none of them are out in the open. Like perhaps a guy has a house and the girl will be with him most of the time, but officially, in name, they don't live together. They have to adhere to a particular external code of conduct, always. Part of this is because it is illegal in Iran. But it is mostly cultural.

Omid's comment exemplifies Moruzzi's contention regarding the effects of the reversal of the public/private dichotomy, while reaffirming her claim regarding male dominance within the realm of sexuality, as perpetuated by the continued control of private spaces by Iranian men. Vashti also confirmed that white marriages have increased in today's Iran, but also reiterated that it has not yet become a socially accepted practice, stating, "It is still taboo. Still, among the majority of the people, it is taboo."

Sepideh speculated that the tendency to engage in sexual activity outside of the traditional "norms" of Iranian culture is more common among the lower socioeconomic classes, because they endure more social restrictions and limitations. Mostafa, however, disagreed, while commenting on how various socioeconomic sectors of contemporary Iranian society view the phenomenon of white marriage. He claimed that the lower classes were less accepting of white marriages, while the upper class and elite are more open to the idea because it represented an emulation of the western way of life. He stated:

> It's different on the south side of the city. The neighbor finds everything out. But if you're part of the upper class, no one cares. And it's actually considered an honor, to be in white marriage. Like, "Oh, oh, well done, just like the *khārejī*[320]!" But among the working class, your neighbor is part of your life, they will find out everything!

Omid also commented on the socioeconomic dimension of the more relaxed attitude toward pre-marital romantic relationships. He stated:

> When I was in high school, a girl who had a boyfriend was a *very* bad thing. A very small percentage of society was able to accept this. A very small percentage of the upper class could openly talk about it. Or accept that their daughter had a boyfriend. This has changed considerably … Iran is charging toward westernization at great speed.

The existence and increase of "white marriages" is the result of a burgeoning interest in sexuality and sexual exploration, which has been facilitated through Post-Network technologies and

[320] The term means "foreigner," although as mentioned before, this word usually indicates Western or Westerner.

practices. As Sara stated, "My generation is one in which everyone is constantly on Instagram, night to day, and looking to hook up."

Within Millenial culture, Iranians distinguish between the 1360s generation and the 1370s generation, particularly with regards to attitudes toward courtship and sexuality. Sara claimed that the 1370s generation is much more open regarding sexuality, and stated that within her demographic, it is considered far more normal to have sex outside the confines of marriage. She attributed this to her generation's greater exposure to the Western world, facilitated through Post-Network conventions. The 1360s generation, on the other hand, was much too entangled with the turmoil wrought by 1979 Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War to freely explore their sexuality, she said. Hamrah shared an anecdote that confirmed Sara's pronouncement, claiming that the 1360s generation (his own generation) had endured the *most* hardship regarding their experience with pre-marital romantic affairs. He stated:

> I think, and many people would agree, that the people who are my age, from the '60s generation, had the *worst* situation in Iran. Like when we came of age, it was the *worst*. First of all, we didn't have cell phones. Just imagine, a teenager without a cellphone! Of course we didn't know what cellphones were back then. But just imagine … when you got a girlfriend, it's not like it was easy to just pick up the phone and call, let alone go over to her house. Her father wouldn't just open the door and say, "Sweetheart your boyfriend is here!" He couldn't know! There was one telephone in the house that everyone used. It was hard for us; it was hard for them (the parental generation)!

He described having a girlfriend (or rather a girl he "talked to") in 1997, when he was thirteen years old. They would talk over the phone, unless they were fortunate enough to see each other on the way to and from school. Hamrah recalled the difficulties he endured attempting to maintain this relationship as an Iranian teenager during the late 1990s, which coincided with the early Khatami era. He stated:

> I could only call her if no one was home. Or I'd go out and use a payphone to call her. Then, you had to hope that the *girl* actually picked up the phone. Like if her dad picked up the phone, you'd hang up. Then suppose the girl picked up, but then she might not be

> able to talk. It was such a headache! Unless she was alone in the house and then she could call. But even then, whoever was closest to the phone at your house would pick it up! You were fourteen years old at the time. You didn't have to permission to say, "Oh wait, that's for me!" Someone else would pick up the phone and they would say that the caller didn't speak and had hung up. So you would wonder whether it was for you or not! This was my generation's teenage experience with romantic relationships.

Hamrah continued to describe how dating in Iran has changed since the Khatami period, stating:

> Once you turned twenty, you started actually dating the girl, but you would go grey before getting to kiss her! You would be sobbing tears [of frustration] before it happened! First of all, where would you do it? You had to be in a situation in which she could leave her house and come to your house, and no one could be home, etc. Now, it's not like this at all! Now, it's perfectly fine for a girl in the family to have a boyfriend!

Hamrah's story demonstrates that one of the more visible changes in Iranian society, as perceived by the Millenial Generation, has been a cultural adaption of a more open attitude toward young people experiencing romantic love. He attributed this to the advances in technology, and in doing so, described one of the effects that emerged with the advent of the Post-Network Era in Iran, a loosening of social stigmas surrounding romance and sexuality outside the confines of marriage.

Structural transformations, such as more education, urbanization, increased mobility and the aggrandizement of women in public life, along with enhanced media consumption, have led to the evolution of Iranian Millenials' expectations.[321] This generation now aspires toward individualism, independence, personal freedom, unrestricted mobility and conjugal unions based on romantic love, which has ultimately contributed to the transformation of cultural ideals regarding family structure and life. These ideational shifts have resulted in a Millenial Generation that harbors a much more relaxed attitude regarding sexuality, love and marriage than its parental generation.

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[321] Khosravi, *Precarious Iran*.

Conclusion

As Omid stated, "Iranian society seems to be running toward Westernization at full speed." However, much of what young Iranians perceive to be "western," is actually an exaggerated version of what they are exposed to on various media sources, amplified by their own sense of deprivation that they feel living within a socially restricted theocracy. The Islamicization of public space has resulted in the reversal of the public/private dichotomy, rendering the public sphere as the realm of authoritarian control, and the private sphere as the arena in which "fun" is had. This shift has significantly influenced the trends that prevail among Millenial Iranians, promoting participation in (sometimes illicit), often self-focused activities that predominantly take place within the private sphere. Meanwhile, the influx of technology that characterizes the Post-Network Era, has highlighted the financial chasm between the "haves" and the "have-nots," particularly through the mechanism of social media, and has served to render class identity as the definitive feature of contemporary Iranian society. The trends that prevail among the Millenial Generation thus function as markers of various class groups and serve as a type of class currency. Iranians are able to reflect the class identity of their choice (to a degree), based on the trends to which they adhere, and then use these trends to maneuver between various groups within society. At the same time, this investigation yields that class identity is not entirely a variable of wealth in Millenial Iran, based on the accounts of my informants regarding the trends that signify class groups. These trends do, however, exist within a commodity culture that has emerged as a result of the prevalence of Post-Network practices and technologies, combined with the Neoliberalism that the Islamic Republic has quietly touted since Rafsanjani's presidency. Within this commodity culture, the trends that prevail among young Iranians not only serve as a means to navigate a class stratified society, but have materialized to counteract

the sociopolitical disillusionment and disenchantment that has accompanied coming to age in Millenial Iran.

Conclusion

Less than a decade after the Green Movement, beginning on December 27, 2017, protests once again erupted in Iran, this time spreading to far-flung corners of the country. Unlike the Green Movement, which was a direct response to the perceived manipulation of the 2009 presidential election, and the 1999 Student Uprising, which was tied to the rights of political prisoners, students and freedom of speech, this newest series of protests is most accurately categorized as "Bread Riots." They are a manifestation of grievances against the economic inequalities, political decision-making and the state's lack of accountability in today's Iran.

The neoliberal restructuring of Iran's economy began in the 1990s, in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War. The increased privatization and the downsizing of the economic role of the state profited, specifically, the educated, urban consumer. This demographic was well positioned to seize government assets and turn them into a concentration of wealth in Tehran and other large centers of commerce in Iran. As Arang Keshavarzian observes, those who have benefitted from this neoliberalism have also been increasingly comfortable displaying their wealth and accouterments, be it through large homes, luxurious apartments, sports cars, etc.[322] Conspicuous consumption and display of wealth has thus been associated with the economic reconstruction that began during Rafsanjani's presidency and continued throughout the Ahmadinejad period, and has been a significant factor in the emergence of the commodity culture that prevails in Millenial Iran.

[322] Interview by Shahram Aghamir. "Bread, jobs and freedom: A conversation with Arang Keshavarzian about the street protests in Iran." Voices of the Middle East and North Africa (VOMENA) on Soundcloud. January 3, 2018. Accessed January 11, 2018. https://soundcloud.com/vomekpfa-1/bread-jobs-and-freedom-a-conversation-with-arang-keshavarzian-about-the-street-protests-in-iran.

Rouhani the Savior

> If you lived through those eight years, you would look to be saved. Rouhani was our savior. Maybe he wasn't at the same level as Khatami, from the intellectual perspective, but regardless, after four years of utter plight and a downward spiraling economy and everything just crashing down, *everything*, he became our savior.

Sohrab and Sepideh were in Iran during the 2013 presidential election. They had participated in the election, had voted for Hassan Rouhani and had rejoiced with his victory. They claimed that Rouhani, the moderate cleric and choice candidate of Iran's progressives, was basically unknown until a few weeks before the election. "No one had even heard of him," Sohrab said, "But because he presented the key to solving the country's problems, the people got excited."

If Khatami had laid down the groundwork for a theocratic democracy, then Rouhani was hoped to be the figure that would implement such a system. Khatami's election was unprecedented. For the first time in the history of the Islamic Republic, twenty million Iranians went out and voted for the Reform that he represented. Khatami's downfall, however, as was discussed in chapter one, was that he would not champion his constituency over the *velāyat-e faqīh*. "He had the power of twenty million votes behind him to push past Khamenei's redlines," Sohrab lamented, "but he didn't do this." Instead, he said, Khatami laid down the groundwork for what democracy *could* look like within the theocracy; his idea of civil society introduced the concept of tolerance to the Islamic Republic's governance.

After eight years of what many of my informants described as regression under the Ahmadinejad administration, the Reformists re-emerged, throwing their weight behind Rouhani in both the 2013 and 2017 presidential elections. While Rouhani does not represent the intellectual reform that Khatami did, and has yet to deliver all of his campaign promises, to many Iranian Millenials, he represented salvation. In this way, Rouhani revived hope among the disillusioned Millenial Generation. What was significant about his candidacy, therefore, was

that he inspired action through voting. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, there has been a constant trend of boycotting presidential elections. Many adherents of this mindset are from the First and Second Generations, ironically, some of the very people who were responsible for the 1979 Revolution. My own parents, as well as a number of my informants' parents fall into this category of Iranians who believe that a vote for any Iranian presidential candidate is a vote in favor of the theocratic government, and therefore abstain. As Sohrab stated, "A series of people think that if we vote for them, we prove the legitimacy of the system and they (the clerical regime) will remain in power." This trend of boycotting the act of voting has continued even in the most recent presidential election of 2017. During the 2017 election, both hashtags #Iwillvote and #Iwillnotvote trended among the Millenial Generation. Sepideh expressed her frustration with those Iranians who boycott elections, claiming that they exacerbate the condition of the country, and feared that it will ultimately result in a situation in which there will be no room for reform. Sohrab also commented on the dangers of not participating in elections, stating, "What happens when you don't vote? Like if instead of fifty percent of people participating, only twenty percent vote? Ultimately someone has to become president." He then pointed to Ahmadinejad's presidency to prove his point and continued:

> Many think that, for example, you can take away the Islamic Republic and you can put an alternative in its place, but what is that alternative? Who is it even? Nothing can flourish in society in which intellectuals are not nurtured. The opposition groups … which one of them has support among the [Iranian] people? This is wishful thinking … our problem is that we compare these things with Europe and America. But look at America now, with Trump as president. People have the right and freedom to say anything about him, even curse at him. In Iran, this sort of thing is not possible, that the universities and political groups be active and free. When we say we need to vote, it's because we don't want society to regress, so that the social intellect of the newer generations increases.

Hannah reiterated that Rouhani's candidacy inspired many young Iranians to vote. She referred to it as a "wave," and stated, "We realized that not voting wouldn't solve anything. So we said,

'Let's go vote,' so that at least the candidate whose perspective is most like ours will be elected." Hannah contended that it was Ahmadinejad's two-term presidency that inspired such a wave among her generation. Mostafa conferred with his wife and speculated that the 2017 election would be the most important election in the history of the Islamic Republic. He based this claim on the assumption that Khamenei will not likely live, or at the very least, not continue his role as the Supreme Leader to the end of Rouhani's second term. He reflected, "They say that after Agha (Khamenei), there is no one as learned or qualified to take on the role of the *valī-e faqīh*, to have the knowledge to act in place of the *Imām Zamān*." Mostafa then mentioned rumors of a possible formation of a *shorāyeh rahbarī* (a leadership council), in which a number of qualified clerics would serve in place of an omnipotent *valī-e faqīh*. In this way, Mostafa ruminated, power would be in the hands of several people instead of just one. I asked Vashti what she felt when Rouhani was first elected president in 2013. She responded with one word: hope. She claimed that a Saeed Jalili (Rouhani's main rival in the 2013 election) presidency would have indicated an extension of Ahmadinejad's regressive politics, and that Rouhani's victory had signaled the defeat of conservatism. "It was very much like we got our revenge … well, not so much revenge, but rather our right," she said.

In both elections, Rouhani's campaign color was purple. However, Vashti recalled how green insignia was sprinkled throughout the celebratory purple regalia of Rouhani's victory, "like the dormant hope of four years prior." I asked why the color green was still prominent in contemporary Iranian politics. Vashti responded that it was an indication that the spirit of the Green Movement has survived. The 2017 presidential election continued to witness an amalgamation of Reformist, Green Movement and Rouhani insignia. Pooneh claimed that she had even seen Mousavi's picture on the cellphone screens that were caught in the frames of

Rouhani's campaign photos. Vashti corrected her and said she meant Khatami, but Pooneh reiterated that she had seen Mousavi's visage as well. She claimed that the green bracelet (an emblem of the Green Movement) was still visible among the crowds that had campaigned for and later celebrated Rouhani's victory. However, Pooneh also mentioned a particular slogan that had gained prominence during this last election, which said, "mā hame sabze sabzīm, bātom banafshemūn kard" (We are all the greenest of green, but the baton has turned us purple). This slogan indicates the reluctance of some Millenial Generation Green Movement supporters to wholeheartedly endorse Rouhani. It was included in @mostafatajzade's tweet regarding the noteworthy slogans of the 2017 election. Sari Pishik (@arezo_shz) had responded to his tweet with a photograph of wall graffiti that stated: "sabz o banafsh nadāre, jonbesh edāme dāre" (Neither green nor purple, the movement continues).

My own informants unanimously agreed that they do not want to see the overthrow of the regime. Pooneh reiterated this, stating, "I don't believe that we are choosing between bad and worse. I really think that we have chosen *good*." Vashti agreed, stating, "You could easily criticize Rouhani, but he did a *lot* of good things." She then referred to Rouhani's healthcare initiative as evidence, claiming that medical procedures that had cost millions of tomans during the Ahmadinejad administration were now down to the ten thousands. This was done through the reallocation of subsidies, she said, stating "Of course they still give out subsidies, but the money that they would steal … he took that money and put it into healthcare. He created an insurance plan that Americans can only dream of!" Vashti then echoed the critique of IRIB made in chapter two, stating that Iranian state news never reports on Rouhani's achievements and pointed to the improved condition of the country's economy. She also compared Rouhani's cabinet to that of Ahmadinejad, stating:

> His team is good. He's not holy, but his team, for the most part, are qualified [people]. That's the difference between Rouhani and Ahmadinejad. [The former president] would explicitly say, "I don't care if they don't have a university education, as long as they are able to work well."

Vashti was specifically referring to Rouhani's finance minister, Ali Tayebnia, who was formerly a professor at Sharif University.

The "Rouhani Effect"

Six months after Rouhani's re-election, protests mushroomed across Iran. At the time of their inception, the protests were leaderless and un-unified regarding their demands, which ranged from dismantling the mandatory hijab, to economic equality, to the freedom of political prisoners, to the overthrow of Khamenei and the entire regime. The most prevalent of all of these grievances, however, was the economy. As was discussed thoroughly in chapter two, international sanctions and economic mismanagement have resulted in a dire economic situation, in which the cost of living is extremely high and unemployment remains rampant. Narges Bajoghli observes, "Economic inequality is not only widening, but also being flaunted by the rich," pointing to the increasing prominence of class identity in Millenial Iran.[323]

Economist Djavad Salehi-Isfahani contends that Rouhani was re-elected by selling the nuclear deal (JCPOA) as the only recourse to improve the dire condition of Iran's economy. Despite the fact that Iran's economy bounced back after the nuclear deal, Salehi-Isfahani asserts that the current protests should be attributed to joblessness and unfulfilled economic expectations. He posits that the noticeable contrast between the wealth of Tehranis and that of the rest of the country demonstrates the role of economic grievances in the current protests, explaining why the recent unrest has occurred primarily in peripheral cities rather than the

[323] Narges Bajoghli, "Behind the Iran Protests," *Jacobin*, January 4, 2018, Accessed January 11, 2018, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/01/iran-protests-hasan-rouhani-green-movement.

capital. Using information from Iran's Household Expenditures and Income Survey (HEIS), which has been collected by the Statistical Center of Iran (SCI) every year since 1960, Salehi-Isfahani shows that smaller, provincial cities experienced a sharp increase in poverty during Rouhani's first year as president, which has continued to remain high ever since; the 11% GDP growth that resulted from the JCPOA has yet to trickle down to these oft-neglected sectors of Iranian society. The figures show how Ahmadinejad's subsidy program, which he initiated in 2011, specifically the cash transfers, had actually served to reduce poverty in these areas. This subsidy program, the *yārāneh* system, allowed recipients to retrieve ATM funds every two months. A 2016 national survey found that nearly all lower-income households in Iran were dependent on the *yārāneh* system. However, in December of 2017, Rouhani proposed a new budget bill to the Parliament that slashed the subsidy program in order to free up money for investment in Iran's dilapidated infrastructure, to reduce government borrowing from banks, to lend more to the private sector and to encourage energy efficiency. Salehi-Isfahani has coined the term the "Rouhani effect" to describe the situation, in which austerity measures have brought down inflation, but at the expense of job growth and raising energy prices. These neoliberal policies favor businesses and the middle class of Tehran, while simultaneously permitting the value of cash transfers to decline.[324] Thus, Rouhani's economic plan, which privileges growth over redistribution, it is not popular among the poor.

As of January 2018, Iran's rate of inflation stands at 17%, but it has fluctuated tremendously throughout the past decade. The embezzlement of millions of dollars at the hands of corrupt politicians and businesses has piqued the ire of ordinary Iranians who live paycheck to paycheck. Rouhani had campaigned on the platform of an improved economy, based on the

[324] Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, "Rouhani's new budget aims to eliminate cash transfers," *Tyranny of Numbers*, December 31, 2017, Accessed January 11, 2018, https://djavadsalehi.com/2017/12/31/rouhanis-new-budget-aims-to-eliminate-cash-transfers/.

supposition of sanction relief and European investment following the nuclear deal. Six months into Rouhani's second term, these economic expectations remain unfulfilled, in part due to American president Donald Trump's threat to nullify the nuclear deal, thereby discouraging foreign banks from funding investment in Iran and European companies from making any sort of foray into a market that may soon be subject to more American sanctions. By eliminating the program for cash transfers, Rouhani effectively positioned himself as the target of the provincial, subsidy-dependent, working class's frustrations. As Bajoghli observes, Rouhani's neoliberal economic policies have tapped into the anxieties of Iranians and have manifested in the nationwide protests.[325]

In his address to the parliament, Rouhani also spoke out against the "financial mafia," calling out a number of conservative clerical and cultural institutions that have, until now, reaped large endowments with little oversight. Rumor had it that the protests were actually incited by hardliner conservative opponents of Rouhani in Mashhad. These reactionary elements had allegedly provoked anti-Rouhani protests, with the assumption that the annual regime-sponsored rally held on the ninth of the Iranian month of Dey (commemorating the suppression of the Green Movement) would reinforce the uprising.

In November of 2017, Ahmadinejad had begun making provocative statements against the rampant corruption in Iran, using social media as his primary tool of communication. He asked why, if Iran's wealth belongs to its people, did the government want to cut funds for social welfare. He also made threats against the judiciary and challenged Khamenei, refusing to back down when threatened and once again revived his populist tactic of attacking the rich and the corrupt. On January 3, 2018, the commander of the IRGC accused Ahmadinejad of fomenting protest. A week later, Ahmadinejad was arrested and imprisoned. Keeping with tradition, the

[325] Bajoghli, "Behind the Iran Protests."

Islamic Republic responded to the spreading protests by slowing down internet speeds to disrupt communications, specifically targeting Telegram and Instagram, which, as mentioned, have become the social media apps of choice in Millenial Iran. As discussed thoroughly in chapter one, this has become the regime's go-to tactic in the event of social uprising.

Who Will Lead Iran's Next Revolution?

These most recent protests, however, differ from the 2009 Green Movement in a number of ways. The Green Movement was the materialization of the Millenial Generation's anger and frustration with the Islamic state's infringement upon their civic and political rights, inspiring up to a million Iranians to rally and demonstrate in the streets. It boasted a charismatic leader (Mousavi), had specific demands and was a movement that largely manifested in Tehran and other major urban centers in Iran. The 2009 Green Movement was an urban secular uprising of affluent citizens demanding social and cultural change, freedom of expression and political participation. This most recent series of protests, however, is not driven by the middle class nor the Millenial Generation. Many Millenial Iranians have, in fact, voiced concern rather than support (either to me, or as Facebook and Instagram posts) for the disparate movement, fearing that the protests will incite a harsh response from the state and result in baseless bloodshed. As one informant told me, "Obviously people have the right to protest and they should be protected, but what they are doing is not in their own interest, like a small child hurting himself when he is hungry." Most Millenial Iranians with whom I spoke to conveyed similar sentiments, particularly emphasizing the "confusing" nature of the situation. While these informants are all residents of the United States, their confusion stemmed from suspicions of foreign meddling.

There is no denying, however, that the majority of the protests that took place in late 2017 and early 2018 in Iran have been perpetuated by the middle class poor, most likely people who had reaped the benefits of Ahmadinejad's populist programs. As Vali Nasr observes, these protests are "bread riots" that reflect deep-seated frustration with economic stagnation, corruption, growing income inequality and a blatant concentration of wealth at the top echelons of Iranian society.[326] The upper middle class and urban intelligentsia were, in fact, taken off guard by the eruption of the protests. These urban elements have noticeably been absent from the protests, largely because they are the demographic that has been the primary beneficiary of what Salehi-Isfahani has dubbed "Rouhaninomics." Rouhaninomics is a combination of liberalizing economic reform and restructuring that involves curtailing the power and influence of religious foundations, state institutions and the Revolutionary Guard, while simultaneously creating a business climate that attracts foreign investment.[327] Moderate urbanites actually feared that the protests would cultivate an environment that would allow Ahmadinejad to re-emerge as the charismatic leader of the new revolution. I observed this in the reactions of my informants to the protests; they either remained silent on the matter or voiced concern that the uprising might unwittingly derail Rouhani's progressive agenda. As one informant said, the people should have the right to protest, but the way they are going about it, they are putting themselves in danger. This informant essentially parroted Rouhani's public statement that acknowledged Iranians' right to protest, but reiterated that violence and destruction of property will not be tolerated.

My informants represent the educated, urban, Millenial Generation of Iran. They are the same students whose energy, enthusiasm and participation fueled the Reform Movement of

[326] Vali Nasr, "What the Iran Protests Were Not," *The Atlantic*, January 10, 2018, Accessed January 11, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/iran-economic-protests-urban-rural-divide/550211/.

1997. Twenty years after the inception of this movement, Rouhani was elected president, not in small part due to his alliance with the Reformists. Participation of this demographic is therefore vital to the success of any social movement; without their involvement, no protest can sustain a legitimate threat to the ruling regime. As Nasr contended, "Without Tehran, these small fires will burn themselves out.".

In a talk that he gave at the University of Arizona on February 23, 2018, Abbas Milani asserted that the age of Messianism has ended in Iran. Iranians no longer need a savior and the new generation is not looking for someone to love or hate, he said. Milani claimed that Iran's greatest hope for substantive reform lies within the potential of the women's movement, for it has relentlessly fought against forced hijab, misogynist laws and interference in their private lives for the past thirty-seven years. Not only have Iranian women not accepted the role that the regime has assigned to them, Milani said, but they become increasingly more ambitious with each passing year, as has been demonstrated by the most recent uprising in Iran. Thus, we cannot ignore the fact that the protests conveying general discontent with the state of the country's economy, have also given Iranian women a platform to call for an end to compulsory veiling. On December 27, 2017, a woman stood on a utility box on Enghelāb (Revolution) Street in Tehran. She tied her white headscarf to a stick and brandished it as a flag toward the crowd. The woman was later identified as thirty-one year old Vida Movahed; she was arrested on that same day but was released a month later on temporary bail.

On December 28, 2017, it was announced that Iranian women would no longer face jail time for *bad-hijabi* (improper veiling). The Reformist newspaper, *Sharq*, quoted police chief General Hossein Rahimi, who said that Iranian women who do not comply with the mandatory hijab law, "will no longer be taken to detention centers, nor will judicial claims be filed against

them." Instead, according to the semi-official news agency, *Tasnim*, Iranian women found guilty of improper veiling will have to attend classes, similar to the concept of American traffic school. Rahimi was appointed as Tehran's chief of police at the beginning of Rouhani's second term. The general was considered more in line with Rouhani's moderate stance on the imposition of Islam on Iranian society, particularly after his announcement of the new hijab law protocol.

The video of Movahed, however, went viral and inspired a series of copycat protests against the mandatory hijab law in Iran. Women of all ages and from all socioeconomic groups have participated in this movement, which has been referred to as "The Girls of Enghelab Street." Some people have claimed that Movahed's initial action was inspired by calls of protest by expatriate journalist, Masih Alinejad.[328] In May 2017, Alinejad launched White Wednesdays, a social movement that encouraged Iranian women to remove their veils or wear white scarves on Wednesdays as a sign of protest. Movahed had used a white scarf in her protest, which incidentally took place on a Wednesday. Yet many of the women who have participated in the 2018 protests against mandatory veiling have claimed that they do not adhere to Alinejad's call. As more women have staged individual protests, General Rahimi has reversed his moderate stance, and in February 2018, he stated that his forces would not tolerate *any* acts of protest.

As of March 2018, Amnesty International has reported that over thirty-five women have been violently attacked and arrested in Iran for protesting against compulsory hijab. On March 8, 2018, a video featuring three women who unveiled and sang "Sorūd-e Barābarī" ("The Anthem of Equality) went viral on various social media platforms. On that same day, outside the Labor Ministry building, fourteen women were arrested for attempting to rally for International

[328] Alinejad founded My Stealthy Freedom (Āzādīhāye Yavāshakī) on May 3, 2014.[328] My Stealthy Freedom was a movement that began as a Facebook page; it encouraged Iranian women to discard their hijabs in public and photograph themselves enjoying a brief moment of freedom. Women then shared there photographs on the My Stealthy Freedom page. Alinejad's movement gained global attention and the Facebook page amassed over 140,000 followers in its first week; currently it has over one million "likes."

Women's Day. These arrests came a day after Iranian news media reported that Narges Hosseini had been sentenced to two years in prison for participating in the hijab protests. Hosseini is a client of one of the most prominent human rights lawyers in Iran, Nasrin Sotoudeh. Iranian state media did not report the Women's Day arrests and instead touted celebration of the Islamic Republic's independently declared Women's Day, observed on March 9, in commemoration of the birth of Fatimah, the daughter of the prophet Muhammad. Meanwhile, Sotoudeh declared that sentences like the one against her client only serve to increase solidarity among Iranian women in their fight against mandatory veiling and their struggle for equal rights in Iran.

Whether it will be Iranian women, or Tehran's urban middle class that leads the next revolution in Iran, remains a fact unknown. What is certain, however, is that Iran is now at a critical juncture. The generation of clerics that founded the Islamic Republic is on its way out. Rafsanjani, who in his final years became the champion of Iran's progressive movement, died in 2017. Khamenei, while still alive, is nearly an octogenarian, and will likely abdicate his position sooner rather than later, some even speculating during Rouhani's final term. Meanwhile, it has become increasingly evident that the neoliberal capitalist model touted by the Islamic Republic, has failed to provide Iranians with a just and democratic state. The commodity culture that has emerged as a result of the Islamic Republic's embrace of this neoliberalism, the advent of the Post-Network Era and a disillusioned demographic of Iranian youth, only reifies the failure of this scheme. At the same time, the theocracy's endurance for nearly forty years demonstrates the success of the *velāyat-e faqīh*. The product of this theocracy, the Millenial Generation, will likely never strive to overtly topple the Islamic Republic. This generation's revolution comes in the form of cultural production, which young Iranians engender through their Post-Network practices and class-defining trends. In doing so, Iran's Millenial Generation gradually chips

away at the traditional patriarchy that has historically defined Iran. And thus, Iranian Millenials will carve out the space necessary, not only to assert themselves, but to redefine Iran, within the context of an increasingly transnational, globalized and technology-driven world.

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